THE LIGHT BEYOND

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By

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FOREWORD

An Englishman, a Frenchman and an American sat in the lounge of the Ritz Hotel in London finishing a conversation which had touched at different times upon the Ruhr, the funding of the English debt to the United States, and the great Conference now sitting in Whitehall. They were men with trained minds, and, notwithstanding their different nationalities, they had discussed each subject without prejudice and with the impartiality of the philosopher. The coming of Louis, the *maître d'hôtel*, to announce that the luncheon which they had ordered with some care half an hour ago was served, brought the conversation to a close. They were all three sufficiently intimate to end it on a note of levity.

"At any rate," the Englishman declared to his American friend, "we shall never quarrel with you. You have all the gold in the world and we need some."

"And believe me," the American rejoined, "we'd put up with most anything from you Britishers. Why, if it weren't for you people whom should we have to beat at polo and golf?"

"We too," the Frenchman intervened, "very badly need some of that gold which you have hoarded up on the other side of the Atlantic, and as for your country, my dear friend," he added, turning to the Englishman, "if ever the sentiment between us should for a moment weaken, we have always to ask ourselves who else in the world is there left to buy our wines?"

"You've got us safe," the American observed. "Most

of our womenkind to-day prefer an apartment in Paris to an estate on Long Island."

"So that between the three," the Englishman concluded, taking his two companions lightly by the arm and leading them towards the restaurant, "our friendship is imperishable."

BOOK ONE

THE LIGHT BEYOND

CHAPTER I

The names of the three men who lunched together that rather dreary February morning were Lord Henry Dorchester, Member of Parliament for a northern manufacturing town, Mark K. Van Stratton, son of one of America's greatest bankers, and Raoul, Marquis de Fontanay, a French diplomat of democratic principles, who had filled various important posts in the service of his country. Of the three Mark Van Stratton had perhaps the advantage in looks. He was over six feet, with broad shoulders and long, athletic body; an international golfer and a famous polo player. He had the blue eyes and fair hair of his Dutch ancestors, but nothing of their stolidity. The Frenchman was of slighter build, his complexion olive, almost sallow, with sunburn freckles, the result of years spent in Africa. His hair was jet black, and his eyes of the same colour, clear and steady; his mouth a little hard, his brown hands slim and strong. He was a renowned big-game shot but the ruling passion of his life was an intense and almost perfervid patriotism. The third man, the Englishman, was of a different type. He was almost as tall as his friend Van Stratton, but he was thinner and of less athletic build. He possessed rather a high colour, fair hair which was inclined to be sandy. He was slightly

short-sighted and possessed a less assured manner than either of his two friends. He was comparatively new to politics but he had already made a reputation as an earnest and well-informed speaker, and although a slight inclination towards heterodox principles made him somewhat of a trouble to the whips of his party, he was clearly marked out for a career. He was an athlete without distinction, from love of the games in which, however, he never excelled; he had dabbled in literature and was reputed to be desirous of writing the life of a well-known contemporary statesman. All three men were approximately of the same age—thirty-four to thirty-five—and having formed their friendship during the war, they had established a habit of monthly luncheon parties in some congenial meeting place. They were all three admirers of women, but not one of them was married or even engaged. Their first toast was an unvarying one. The Englishman raised his glass.

"To France and America!"

"To England and France!" Mark Van Stratton rejoined.

"To America and England!" Raoul de Fontanay echoed.

This time another toast was included, proposed by the American.

"To the success of the Conference!"

The Frenchman groaned slightly but he drank the toast and they set down their glasses empty. The wine was commented upon and approved. They were all moderate drinkers, but connoisseurs. After their fashion, each according to his tendencies, they were connoisseurs of life.

"To lunch without women," Raoul de Fontanay observed, "is now and then a relief."

"If one would converse seriously," Dorchester assented,

"it is a necessity. Women are too distracting. They force our thoughts into an absolutely fanciful groove, and after they have left us the interval generally is too short to talk rationally."

"Better not let any of my countrywomen hear you speak like that," Mark Van Stratton observed.

The Frenchman smiled.

"Your countrywomen are adorable," he declared, "but if they have a fault it is that they take themselves too seriously. They will not admit or recognise the great boundaries which divide the sexes. I cannot talk to a woman seriously. I need a man to understand what I am aiming at, to understand what I would hope and work for. Woman is our best helpmate when she leaves our careers alone, when she is simply amusing and beautiful and perhaps affectionate."

"That is all very well for one's mistress," Dorchester conceded, "but no one in this country, at any rate, can altogether keep his wife out of the serious side of his life."

"You English!" Raoul de Fontanay murmured, with a little shrug of the shoulders. "Ah well! Still, as we must talk of women, let us ask one another this: we are all fond of them and yet not one of us is married or even engaged. Why not?"

"I shall marry some day," Dorchester announced. "Up till now my work has been too absorbing."

"I have looked around," Mark Van Stratton admitted, "but nothing doing so far. I admire Frenchwomen more than any in the world but they either keep you dangling at their heels all the time, or else in the most charming way possible fill your place. The English girls I have met are all right for sport, but they are either too reserved and cold, or too slangy. I suppose when I do marry it will be an American."

"As for me," Raoul de Fontanay pronounced, "I shall never marry. There is something ugly to me in infidelity, and I am too conscious of my limitations. I could never be faithful for a lifetime or a quarter of it. What about you, Mark?"

The American had been looking steadfastly across the room. His face had become curiously intent, his eyes fixed. He did not reply for a moment. Then he drew a little breath and answered without withdrawing his gaze.

"I could be faithful all my life," he said, "to the girl who has just come in—the girl in grey with the chinchilla furs."

"This is amazingly interesting," Raoul de Fontanay declared, thrusting his monocle into his eye and looking across the room.

"Thrilling!" Dorchester assented. "A trifle on the melodramatic side perhaps, but atoned for by Mark's obvious earnestness. Would it be possible to indicate the favoured lady?"

"You cannot possibly mistake her," Mark replied. "There is no one else. She is in grey with chinchilla furs, and something green in her hat. She is just sitting down now, facing you, at the table by the window, with an elderly man."

The Marquis glanced in the direction indicated. His manner changed a little. He dropped his monocle and whistled softly under his breath. Dorchester was enthusiastic.

"She is awfully good-looking," he pronounced. "Like a piece of Dresden china. Who is she, Mark?"

"I don't know—yet," was the young man's reply.

"I do," Raoul de Fontanay announced. "I know her name, at any rate, and I have some slight acquaintance with her companion."

"Who is he—a relative?" Mark asked quickly.

De Fontanay's surprise was obvious.

"Do you mean to tell me," he demanded, "that neither of you know who he is?"

"I have no idea whatever," Dorchester confessed.

"Neither have I," Mark affirmed.

Raoul de Fontanay sipped his wine. He had a sense of the dramatic and he paused for a moment to give weight to his words.

"That," he confided, "is one of the best-known men on paper and the least-known actually in the world—Felix Dukane."

"Gee!" Mark murmured under his breath.

"Felix Dukane!" Dorchester repeated wonderingly. "He isn't in the least like what I expected."

"What he does here," De Fontanay continued, with a slight frown, "I cannot imagine. He is very seldom seen in a restaurant—very seldom seen anywhere, as a matter of fact. They say that he has never been interviewed in his life, and that he beat the only photographer who ever succeeded in taking a snapshot of him in the streets of New York with a loaded stick, which he always carries, and smashed the camera. He doesn't look it, but he is really prodigiously strong."

Mark's national respect for wealth kept him a little awed.

"Felix Dukane!" he muttered. "The third richest man in the world."

"He is not only that," De Fontanay commented, "but he has the power of raising more money than any other born financier. If he speaks the word the banks in London, New York and Paris obey. I know for a fact that he was the inscribed holder of thirty million francs of War Loan in 1921 and he held about the same amount in French *rentes*. All the time, too, there were rumours

that it was he who arranged the first German loan."

"A man of wide sympathies," Dorchester observed.

"Too wide," De Fontanay agreed. "I confess that I do not like to see him in London just now. It is the one city which he dislikes and seldom visits. There can be only one reason for his presence here."

"The Conference?" Dorchester suggested.

De Fontanay nodded.

"He must have some idea that the terms will be made possible for Germany. He has perhaps a loan in his mind."

Mark remained profoundly uninterested in all such considerations.

"Say, how is it if you know the old man that you have never met the daughter?" he asked.

"Alas!" De Fontanay replied. "How does one obtain the chance? Socially he does not exist. People have grown tired of sending him invitations. He never even answers them. I chanced to see them both in Monte Carlo last season. They arrived in his yacht and they left the next day—people said because he was annoyed at the sensation his presence had created."

"Of what nationality is he?" Mark enquired.

"No one knows exactly. He passes as English. His wife, I know, was a Servian. She was the daughter of a former Prime Minister. I never saw her but I remember her being spoken of as a famous beauty."

"Say, what I want to get at is this," Mark declared earnestly: "if you have never met the girl, do you know the father well enough to present me?"

De Fontanay shook his head doubtfully.

"I am afraid I do not," he acknowledged. "With any one else I would try to gratify you, but he is very difficult. Observe the way he looks round the room. His stare is absolutely stony. He has probably recognised

me long ago, but I doubt whether he will take the slightest notice."

"I have just got to know her somehow," Mark insisted earnestly.

"As a matter of fact, I too am interested," Dorchester affirmed.

The services of luncheon proceeded, but the continuity of their discussion seemed to have become broken and conversation was only fitful. The attention of both Dorchester and Mark seemed entirely engrossed by observation more or less surreptitious of the table where Felix Dukane and his daughter were seated. De Fontanay, whose turn it was that day to be host, suffered their neglect and watched them both with a slightly cynical amusement. As they passed out of the restaurant at the conclusion of luncheon he linked arms with them and spoke, half-banteringly, of their obsession.

"My friends," he said, "it is a fact that both of you take women a little more seriously than I. Racial instinct, perhaps. Well, let me tell you this: the joy of a woman's love is great, but the joy of the friendship between us three is, I think, a greater thing. You will not forget it—either of you?"

"Of course not," Dorchester assented firmly.

"Sure thing!" Mark murmured, a little mechanically.

"That being clearly understood," De Fontanay continued, "I will lay myself open to rebuff and do my best to present you both to the young lady. We will take our coffee at one of the lower tables. The opportunity may present itself."

The three men found a table in the lounge which commanded a view of the departing guests and the eyes of two out of the three of them scarcely ever left the exit from the restaurant. They still talked, but in a disconnected fashion, and under Mark's manner there was

always a vein of almost feverish impatience. At last the inevitable happened.

"Say, they're coming right along!" Mark declared. "You'll have to look alive, Raoul."

The latter, with a little gesture of resignation, rose to his feet and the two young men leaned forward, their eyes fixed upon the advancing pair. There was not the slightest personal resemblance between father and daughter. Felix Dukane was a short man, powerfully built, with a head large in proportion to his body, and a protruding underlip. He had masses of grey-black hair, a pallid complexion and cold grey eyes, set, as he walked down the carpeted way from the restaurant, in a hard, unseeing stare. The girl by his side was without a doubt beautiful. She was a trifle taller than her father, slim, with light brown hair, hazel eyes which looked about her with pleasant curiosity, the smooth, perfect complexion of youth and health, a mouth wonderfully attractive, with indications of humour in its uplifted corners. Whilst her father's one object seemed to be to get out of the place as speedily as possible, to look at no one, to remain unnoticed if possible, she, on the other hand, showed some disposition towards loitering and was obviously taking in her surroundings with a certain amount of interest and pleasure. De Fontanay, summoning up his courage, as he afterwards admitted, intercepted Dukane with a courteous bow and outstretched hand.

"This is the first time, I think, Mr. Dukane, that I have had the pleasure of seeing you in London," he said. "You will remember that we met at the French Embassy in Rome, and subsequently, I think, in Paris. My name is De Fontanay—Raoul de Fontanay."

"I remember you, Marquis," Dukane admitted, without rudeness but certainly without enthusiasm.

"You will perhaps give me the great pleasure," De

Fontanay continued, "of presenting me to your daughter."

The introduction was made and the three stood talking together. Yet even then the final issue of De Fontanay's efforts appeared to be in doubt. Felix Dukane's manner lost none of its brusqueness and he showed distinct signs of a desire to escape. The two young men sat and watched anxiously.

"I am forced to acknowledge, Mark," Dorchester confided, "that you have better taste than I gave you credit for. With one possible exception I should say that Felix Dukane's daughter is the most attractive young woman I have ever seen."

"There couldn't be an exception, even a possible one," Mark declared gruffly.

Dorchester tapped a cigarette upon the table and lit it.

"The times have gone by," he remarked, "when it would have been my duty to encase myself in unwieldy armour, mount a spirited dray horse, and perform prodigies of valour with the most inefficient weapon the mind of man ever conceived, to prove—Mark, she's coming! Good old Raoul! He's brought it off!"

De Fontanay arrived with his guests, assured as usual and urbane of manner. Felix Dukane at close quarters seemed even more cold and ungracious than his appearance suggested. The girl, on the other hand, displayed a charm of manner which more than atoned for her father's shortcomings.

"Mademoiselle," De Fontanay said, "will you permit that I present my two friends—Lord Henry Dorchester, Mr. Van Stratton—Miss Dukane, Mr. Dukane. I have persuaded Mr. and Miss Dukane to take their coffee with us."

Attentive waiters hurried up with chairs and the little party subsided into a semicircle, the cynosure for many

eyes, as the identity of the small man with the big head, the mystery millionaire, as many people called him, began to be whispered about. Dukane responded to his host's courteous attempts at conversation with cold monosyllables. He had the air of a man who for some unknown reason was submitting to an unwelcome social act. It was Dorchester who first engaged the young lady's attention. They talked for several moments of trifles. Then, during a temporary lapse in the conversation, she turned with unexpected graciousness towards Mark, as though desirous of including him.

"You are an American?" she asked.

"I am," he answered, "although I am afraid not a very patriotic one. Most of my time is spent on this side."

"I was in New York last year," she confided. "A very wonderful place! My father was immersed in business all the time, however, and I was a little dull. Tell me—your friend Lord Henry's profession I know, only last week I heard him speak in the House of Commons, and the Marquis, of course, is a diplomat—how do you interest yourself in life?"

For a moment Mark was taken aback. The directness of the question, the friendly but inquisitive regard of her bewildering eyes almost embarrassed him.

"I am afraid," he confessed, "that I am rather what they call over here a 'slacker.' Of course there was the war. Since then I have done little which you would call of real interest."

"You play games, do you not?" she remarked. "I have seen your name amongst the polo players. I think I saw you play once at Ranelagh."

"It is quite likely," he admitted.

"But when the season for games passes," she persisted, "how do you spend your time? You have still, perhaps,

business affairs to attend to? In your country they become so absorbing."

He shook his head.

"I know better than to attempt anything of the sort," he confided. "When I left college, I went to Washington for a time. I had some idea of studying diplomacy. They sent me down to Bolivia for a few months and afterwards to Equador. I disliked both heartily. Couldn't seem to find anything in the job which was worth while. Then the war came and since then I am afraid I have not been what you would call a serious person."

She had the air of beginning to lose interest in him. Mark noticed it and sought desperately to reëstablish himself.

"Of course," he argued, "it is all very well for Dorchester. He's living in his own country and he has his own interests and the interests of his class to work for. For me there is nothing. America does not need men of my kind who have had no commercial training. If I were to try, for instance, to manage my own affairs over there, it would simply mean that money would be wasted. There are none of the professions which attract me, and if they did I should be only taking work away from a man who probably needed it more."

"A somewhat indolent excuse," she murmured reprovingly. "Why not return to diplomacy?"

"I thought of it once," he admitted.

She turned away and addressed some remark to De Fontanay, whose gallant efforts to entertain Dukane had come momentarily to an end. Mark had a queer and disconcerting feeling that he had somehow fallen into disfavour with the one person in the world he was most anxious to conciliate. He watched admiringly the charming turn of her head, her white neck with its single row

of beautiful pearls, the full, unbecarmined lips, the transparent, untouched complexion. He watched her smile and found it adorable; a smile accompanied by the deepening of the fascinating little lines at the corners of her eyes. She was discussing with De Fontanay the poetry of a Russian whom they had both met in Paris, and for the first time Mark realised that she possessed the slightest possible trace of a foreign accent—an accent which seemed to make her voice even more attractive. He leaned over and, taking his courage into his hands, addressed her father.

"You live in Paris, don't you, sir?" he asked. "I remember having your house in the Bois pointed out to me once."

"It is my headquarters," Dukane admitted. "I have, however, other habitations. Just now my affairs make it necessary that I spend some time in London."

"You are spending the season here, you and your daughter?" Mark asked eagerly.

Dukane knocked the ash from the cigar which De Fontanay had persuaded him to light.

"I do not know what you mean by the season," he answered. "Such things do not interest me. I am here for another six weeks or two months, until certain affairs in which I am concerned are concluded. When they are I shall get away as soon as I can. The English climate and cooking are the worst in the world."

Estelle Dukane turned suddenly towards her neighbour. She had apparently concluded her conversation with De Fontanay, who was leaning back in his chair with the satisfied air of one who has just produced a successful repartee.

"The Marquis is too literary to be human," she declared. "Are you a great reader, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"I am afraid not," he confessed, a little gloomily, "and

I am afraid that what I do read in a general way could scarcely be called literary."

She concentrated upon him a regard which might almost have been termed critical. His expression at that moment was discontented, but he had by no means the appearance of a man lacking in intelligence. De Fontanay had bravely resumed his attempts at conversation with Dukane, a passing acquaintance had paused to speak to Dorchester, and Mark and his companion were practically alone.

"Should you very much resent a word of advice from a stranger?" she asked, dropping her voice a little.

"If you mean yourself, I should welcome it," he assured her eagerly, "but then you are not a stranger. I think that I have known you for quite a long time."

She laughed softly. His intense earnestness redeemed his speech from any suggestion of impertinence.

"Very well then," she continued, "I will speak to you not as a stranger but as a friend. If by any chance the opportunity should come for you to take up some useful work—I do not mean wasting your energies in Bolivia or Equador or any of those terrible countries, but if at any time it should be made easy for you to engage in some work of real importance, promise me not to refuse it."

He was a little bewildered, but he did not hesitate.

"I won't refuse anything," he promised. "If I am offered a job as Consul to the North Pole or President of the United States I'll take it on if you wish me to."

She rose to her feet in response to an imperative gesture from her father, and after farewells which the latter's impatience restricted to the merest conventionalities, they took their leave. The three men resumed their seats.

"Well?" De Fontanay enquired, as he lit a fresh cigarette.

"She is just as wonderful as I knew she was," Mark declared fervently.

"She is the most attractive human being I have ever met," Dorchester pronounced. "She is coming down to the House to hear me speak one day next week. I warn you, Mark, that if you are in earnest you may possibly find in me a rival."

There was a gleam of cynical amusement in De Fontanay's eyes as he leaned back and laughed softly.

"When Estelle Dukane makes up her mind to marry," he told them, "her father will buy her a kingdom. If either of you two are really in earnest, take my advice and forget."

The departure of Felix Dukane from the hotel was characteristic. He lingered for a moment in the doorway until he caught sight of a tall, broad-shouldered man in plain clothes standing with the other footmen. At a sign from Dukane the latter hurried across the road and stood there waiting, whilst his master crossed the pavement swiftly, and passed into the remote corner of the limousine which had been drawn up against the kerb. The girl followed him. The attendant seated himself next to the chauffeur. They drove off eastwards.

"A coincidence, that we should meet that young man," she murmured.

"I suppose so," he admitted surlily. "Not that he's likely to be the least use to us."

Estelle smiled meditatively as she looked out of the window.

"One never knows," she murmured.

CHAPTER II

Mr. Stephen Huventhayer, Ambassador from the Government of the United States to the Court of St. James, a pleasant, dignified-looking man of slightly over middle age, was standing upon the pavement waiting for his car as Mark left the hotel. The latter raised his hat respectfully and would have passed on. The Ambassador, however, detained him.

"Just the man I was looking for, Mark!" he exclaimed. "Are you in a hurry for half an hour?"

"Nothing whatever to do, sir, this afternoon," was the prompt admission.

"Step in and drive round with me to Carlton House Terrace then," the other invited. "I have a few little matters to look after down there. They won't take me more than a few minutes. Brownlow was writing to you this evening."

Mark, mystified but interested, accepted the invitation and entered the car. During the short drive his companion spoke only of the weather and some mutual family friends. Arrived at Carlton House Terrace, he led the way to his own study where Brownlow, his private secretary, was at work.

"Anything urgent?" the Ambassador enquired.

"Nothing of any importance, sir. They have rung up from Whitehall once or twice but we were able to deal with their enquiries."

"That's good. You know Mark Van Stratton?"

The two young men smiled at each other.

"Of course you do, though," the Ambassador contin-

ued. "You were at Harvard together, weren't you, and you've met often enough round at Marsden House. Give us a few minutes, Brownlow. I want to have a word or two with this young man."

"I have to go down to the Consul's office, if you can spare me for half an hour, sir."

"Capital! Don't be longer if you can help it."

Mr. Huventhayer waited until the door was closed. Then he motioned Mark to a chair and seated himself at his desk.

"Am I correct in believing, Mark," he began, "that you have so far imbibed English habits as to be living the life of a gentleman at ease?"

"Well, that's one way of putting it, sir," Mark admitted. "Since the war I am afraid I have led rather a useless existence."

"Should you like some work?"

The question was so unexpected that it came almost as a shock. Mark's thoughts flashed back to the Ritz, to the girl leaning towards him, her earnest, almost mysterious admonition. If this was coincidence it was coincidence of an amazing sort.

"What kind of work, sir?" he enquired.

"We need help here and at the Embassy," Hr. Huventhayer explained. "We have all we can do at any time. They don't over-staff us, as you know, and perhaps you've heard—we've lost Dimsdale. Influenza, or something of the sort. He's going home by the next steamer."

"Sorry to hear that, sir," Mark ventured. "He always seemed so keen."

Mr. Huventhayer sighed.

"Well, anyhow, he's gone," he said, "and what with our ordinary work and having to provide help for Hugerson and Martin at the Conference, we are desperately short-handed."

"Do you think I should be of any use, sir?" Mark asked eagerly.

"Of course you would," was the prompt reply. "Anyway, I want you to try. You could relieve Brownlow here of some of the social data he has to get up for Mrs. Huventhayer, and then there is work every day in connection with the Conference. Hugerson is all the time plying us with figures and statistics he wants verified. By the bye, you don't speak German by any chance, do you?"

"Why, just so that I can make myself understood," Mark admitted.

"Better and better," the Ambassador declared. "I was going to give you a room here, but I think you had better start up at Marsden House. Mrs. Huventhayer will be able to get at you more easily there, and if we are really able to make use of you down at Whitehall in Dimsdale's place it will be handier to have you on the spot. You can dine to-night, I hope?"

"I have no engagement, sir."

"Capital! We'll have a further talk after dinner. I've got to have a few words with Brownlow here, so you had better get along. Come early to-night—at about a quarter to eight. Mrs. Huventhayer may want you to help her. She misses Ned Dimsdale rather when we have guests."

Mark was dismissed with a kindly nod, and walked out, feeling a little dazed. Instead of turning back into Pall Mall, he descended the steps and turned towards the Strand with some idea of paying a call at the Savoy.

"A ready-made diplomat!" he murmured to himself, as he strolled along. "How in the name of all that's amazing could she have guessed?"

He turned up his coat collar, for the mist which had been hanging about all day was turning into rain, and

towards the river there were signs of fog. He had only proceeded a hundred yards or so, however, when a long two-seated car, driven by a girl, passed him at a great speed and suddenly, with a discordant grinding of brakes, was brought to a standstill by the kerb a little way ahead. The girl looked round and waved to him. Mark, recognising her with a thrill of pleasure, raised his hat and hurried forward.

"Have I splashed you?" she asked. "If so, I am very sorry. It was wonderful seeing you so unexpectedly. Jump in, please."

Her invitation, as she delivered it, seemed to be the most natural thing in the world. Mark obeyed without hesitation and in a moment they were off again. She was sitting very low amongst the cushions and was completely enveloped in a mackintosh driving coat, but she wore no veil and he realised at once that there was a change in her since luncheon time. She had lost that becoming tinge of colour, her eyes were set and her expression strained.

"I cannot talk to you yet," she said, during the short distance they traversed before they reached the Arch. "I wish to drive as quickly as I can and the traffic is always terrible getting to Northumberland Avenue. I am taking you down to my father's office in Norfolk Street."

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," she admitted, "but I cannot tell you about it now."

"Don't worry," he begged her. "If I can help I'll be proud. Get right along with your driving. If you're stalled I can take the wheel. I have one of these cars myself."

She nodded, but it was soon very clear that she needed no help. She threaded her way through the maelstrom

of traffic to Northumberland Avenue with scarcely a pause, and, regardless of the disapproving glances of the policeman on duty, swept down on to the Embankment, raced along under the Arch, and, bearing a little to the left, turned up one of the streets leading up to the Strand. At the third house on the left she paused. There was a powerful-looking commissionaire at the door, but no brass plate or any indication of the nature of the premises.

"This is where my father interviews people when he does not wish to be seen in the city," she confided. "Come this way, please."

He followed her into the building. There was nothing whatever to denote the fact that he was in the office of one of the world's great millionaires. The tessellated stone pavement was uncovered. The two rooms through which they passed contained only half a dozen men working at separate desks, and three or four stenographers. The girl knocked at an inner door and, without waiting for a reply, threw it open.

"Please come in," she invited.

They entered a comfortable but by no means luxuriously furnished apartment. She closed the door and sank into a chair a little breathlessly. Mr. Dukane sat at a table upon which were several telephones, a banker's directory and a few other cloth-bound volumes. He looked up coldly at their entrance, without showing any particular sign of surprise or curiosity. It seemed to Mark almost as though he might have been expected.

"Olsen had left," the girl explained. "I found Mr. Van Stratton in the Mall. I have told him nothing."

Felix Dukane eyed the young man with an indifferently appraising air. Mark, who was already sufficiently confused, could scarcely make up his mind even as to the nature of the thoughts which were passing through the

other's brain. He seemed to have become an object of speculative interest to the great financier but nothing in the latter's demeanour afforded the slightest clue as to any possible reason for such interest.

"Since the young man is here," Felix Dukane said at last, "we had better go upstairs and explain our dilemma."

He rose to his feet, unlocked the door of another exit from the room by means of a key attached to his watch chain, and led the way across the hall to a small automatic lift into which he motioned them to precede him. He started it by pressing a button and they commenced to ascend. Mark ventured upon a somewhat bewildered question, but the girl only shook her head. Her self-control seemed for the moment to have deserted her. Her lips were quivering, and there was an expression almost of horror in her eyes. More than ever Mark wondered how she had been able to drive with such success through the crowded streets. Presently the lift came to a standstill. They all stepped out into a little hall thickly carpeted and having an appearance of luxury which the downstairs premises had entirely lacked. With another key Mr. Dukane opened a heavy oak door, leading into an apartment which, from the number of books and easy-chairs, might have been a man's library. The furniture, however, was in disorder, a couch was overturned, and a small table was lying on its side with a vase of flowers beside it from which the water was trickling across the carpet. Suddenly Mark gave a startled exclamation. Upon the floor, behind one of the chairs, was the outstretched figure of a man, a rug covering the upper part of the body.

"Good God, what's that?" Mark cried.

"I have had the misfortune," Dukane explained in his hard, dry tone, "during a somewhat heated altercation, to kill an importunate and annoying visitor."

CHAPTER III

THERE was a brief period of horrified silence; the girl, leaning against the side of an easy-chair with her head turned away, was clearly on the point of a breakdown; Felix Dukane stood like a statue with his underlip thrust out; Mark was dumb, as much from sheer surprise at this unexpected termination of his little adventure as from any sense of shock. But only a few feet away lay without a doubt the evidence of the truth of Felix Dukane's confession. Mark found himself dwelling curiously, upon unimportant details: the neat patent shoes, the monogrammed socks, the carefully pressed trousers. He roused himself at last to speech.

"Look here," he said, "you're not serious. You may have hurt him. He can't be dead."

"I tell you that he is dead," Dukane replied harshly. "I did not mean to strike so hard but he had made me very angry. I struck him on the side of the head behind the ear, and he went down like a log. It is the second time he has tried to blackmail me. This time I lost my temper."

"But what are you going to do about it?" Mark ventured. "Have you rung up for a doctor, or for the police?"

Dukane scowled at the young man who stood by his side.

"What would be the good of that?" he demanded. "The doctor could tell me no more than I know—that the man is dead. As for the police, they are the last people I want. Do you suppose I want to be dragged to the dock to answer for this?"

"Is there any other way?" Mark asked bluntly.

"Of course there is," was the angry rejoinder. "If the man whom my daughter went to fetch this afternoon had not by some evil chance left for Paris to-day, he would have done everything that is necessary. The question is, are you man enough to take his place?"

"What do you mean?"

Dukane suddenly gripped his arm and Mark realised the man's enormous muscular strength. The fingers seemed to crumble up the flesh and almost crush the bone beneath. He turned him towards the window.

"Look there," he pointed out hoarsely. "You see what's coming?"

Mark glanced towards the river. Already the lamps across the bridge were shining dimly through a bank of yellow-black fog. Patches of it hung over the water, and even in this narrow thoroughfare the opposite houses were barely visible. Dukane pointed upwards. Above the roofs it hung like a descending curtain, solid and fearsome.

"In half an hour," Felix Dukane continued, "no man in the streets will see another. Think! You drive a little way in the car below—where you will. You take—it—with you—anywhere, away from here. Who is to know? You look strong. You could lift a thing like that with one hand. What about the bridge, the river?"

"Say, is this a serious suggestion?" Mark gasped.

"Of course it is. Do you think I want to go into the dock and be charged with killing a creature like that? They might not punish me. The man is scum, I tell you, but I am in the midst of negotiations upon which the peace of Europe may depend. If I am interrupted now it may mean ruin to thousands. I tell you that it

is the work of my life which draws near to the end. Every hour of my time is pledged. Besides, my name! The thing might not be properly understood. There are risks I can't speak of."

Involuntarily Mark turned his head and as he did so the girl came towards him. All that wonderful light, the expression which had played like some inner sunshine around her lips and eyes, had gone. The life was drained from her. There remained still, however, the nameless, unanalysable appeal which seemed to have drifted to him from the moment of her entrance across the crowded restaurant.

"Of course this must all sound like madness," she said, "but help us—oh, help us, if you can."

"I should very much like to help," he assured her gravely.

"A scandal just now would mean such terrible things for my father," she went on, "and it would do no good. The man is dead and there is an end of it. You will not run a great risk. If you are discovered you can say that you were on your way to a hospital, and we will tell the truth. But you will not be discovered. You will save us from a great disaster, and you will do nobody any harm. It is so much to ask of a stranger, and yet, when I saw you, I remembered what you said to me an hour or two ago. I remembered—"

The pause was unaccountably eloquent, thrilling in a mysterious, unexpected way. She was offering nothing, promising nothing, and yet he felt an overmastering impulse to do her bidding, to run any risk, to establish himself in her life as her benefactor, the man who had not failed her in this terrible moment.

"If you are Mark Van Stratton," her father intervened, "I cannot bribe you. You must have all the money you need in life, but if there is any other way,—"

"You cannot bribe him, Father," she interrupted. "He is going to do this for us, for my sake. Will you render me this great service and become my friend for always, Mr. Mark Van Stratton? I have faults—many—but no one in the world has ever called me ungrateful."

Her hand had slipped from his shoulder and her soft, caressing fingers lay upon his. Her eyes now had lost the glaze of horror. They had opened. They were full of appeal. They pleaded and promised at the same time. Mark had no more thought of hesitation.

"I shall do what you ask me," he declared, taking her other hand for a moment into his. "Only not in the river. That seems too horrible. I will find a safe, quiet place somewhere."

"You will never regret it," she whispered.

"I am to take your car?" he enquired.

"Why not?" she replied. "You say that you can drive it, and it will save time. There are piles of rugs and the seats are very low. Even when you drive you look as though you were lying down."

"And from here to the street?"

"The lift we came up in is a private one," Dukane explained. "No one else is allowed to use it. These few rooms are my haven of escape from people whom I do not wish to see. The commissionaire outside I have sent away. All you have to do is to carry him down, cover him up in the car, and drive off. You will be perfectly safe. Look outside."

Mark glanced through the dripping windows. The atmosphere was becoming denser, the street lamps diffused patches of sickly yellow. There were shouts in the street, and the roar of the traffic had subsided into a rumble, almost a silence. Even inside the room little tongues of fog seemed to have found their way.

"What I am asking you to do," Dukane declared, "is

not only for my sake. It is for the sake of millions of others. My work cannot be stopped."

"I will do it," Mark assured him. "The sooner I start the better. If the fog becomes worse, I may not be able to drive the car at all. Is there petrol?"

"Full up," the girl answered.

"What shall I do with the car afterwards?"

"Leave it in any garage you like," she begged. "I can send for it."

Within the room now the darkness was becoming every minute more dense. Mark stooped down and lifted the man from the floor; a slight, frail creature he seemed. His complexion was fair, almost sandy, his features insipid, his mouth twisted as though in pain. There was a cruel wound at the back of the head with a few drops of blood. Nothing more. His weight to Mark was negligible. Dukane held open the door whilst the girl looked out. She crossed the passage, held her finger upon the knob and the lift came rumbling up.

"There is no one whom you could possibly meet," she whispered. "This part of the premises is completely cut off. Even my maid is at the hotel where we have rooms—not here."

He nodded and stepped into the lift carrying his burden, nerved for his task by her final glance of gratitude. Down below all was as Dukane had said: an empty passage, the car waiting at the kerb, its lights throwing strange little ineffective haloes across the gathering wall of darkness. Mark laid the recumbent figure upon the seat, covering it to the throat with rugs, and climbed over the other side into the driver's place. Dukane, who had followed him down, stepped away, coughing heavily.

"I have a private wire here—1000 Y Gerrard—if there is anything it is necessary to tell me," he confided.

"I'll remember," Mark promised.

"You will never regret this, Van Stratton," were Dukane's valedictory words.

"I hope not," the young man answered.

And then the drive commenced which Mark remembered for the rest of his life. Choosing the side streets, he crawled down on to the Embankment, up Northumberland Avenue, there to find a holocaust of motionless traffic, men shouting, women crying with fear, shadowy figures waving torches passing here and there, escorting a string of taxicabs and cars. Somehow or other he reached Pall Mall and crept up St. James' Street into Piccadilly, only to find things worse. He had finally set his mind against Dukane's first suggestion. The river was too terrible a thought. He would carry this thing through his own way. Slowly he felt his way down to West Kensington, and there a sudden slight uplifting of the fog enabled him to pass through Hammersmith and over Hammersmith Bridge at almost a reasonable speed. Round Ranelagh and Barnes, though, the darkness was almost impenetrable. Twice he was obliged to get out to locate with difficulty the kerbstone. At the crossroads by Roehampton Lane he turned to the right. Things were a little better here and in course of time he found his way to the entrance of Richmond Park. To his immense relief the gates still stood open and, unobserved by any one, he crawled in. He travelled on towards the Kingston Gate for about a mile, and then brought the car to a standstill by the side of the road. There was not a visible object anywhere and scarcely a sound, until a deer, attracted by the lights, came close up and then cantered away. Otherwise it seemed as though he had found his way into a new and strange world, peopled by an unimaginable silence. Mark was a young and strong man to whom nerves were a thing unknown, but for a moment, as he sat there, he shivered. The completion

of his task seemed grotesque, like a hideous fragment of nightmare. The thing had to be faced, however. He descended, made his way round to the other side of the car, lifted out his burden, stumbled with it a little way across the turf, and finally rested it with its back to a tree. When he stood away he was surprised to find that although the exertion had been slight enough, there were drops of sweat standing out upon his forehead. He thrust his hand into his pocket, found his case and lit a cigarette, felt his way round the car and opened the door. Then he stood suddenly still, for of all the horrors of the day the one he had now to face seemed to him the greatest and most incredible. From a few feet behind him, out of the darkness, came the sound of a feeble voice:

"Don't leave me here. Give me some brandy. Oh, God, my head!"

CHAPTER IV

After the first shock had passed Mark was conscious of an immense sense of relief. The reasonableness of the whole thing came flooding in upon him. He realised the idiocy of accepting the word of a terrified man and girl as to what had happened, to have been satisfied of the death of the man, without a doctor's verdict. Nevertheless, the first few seconds were extraordinarily thrilling. He stepped back to the tree and stood leaning down with his hand upon its trunk, looking at the recumbent figure. The commencement of the conversation naturally presented some difficulties.

"So you're not dead?" he ventured, a little clumsily.

"I take some killing," was the weary reply. "Who are you? A friend or an enemy? You mean to finish what he began? Why? I have not done you any harm."

"I am certainly not your enemy," Mark assured him. "You are perfectly safe with me. If you can lift your arms, put them round my neck and I will carry you back to the car."

The man obeyed feebly, and Mark made him as comfortable as he could amongst the cushions. He was still ghastly pale and the wound on his head was bleeding slightly. Mark tied it up with his handkerchief.

"We'll stop at the first pub," he said, "and I'll get you some brandy."

"And—afterwards?"

"I'm damned if I know. Where do you live? Where do you want to be taken?"

There was no reply. The man had closed his eyes

again and appeared to be only partially conscious. Mark drove slowly back through the Park and out into the streets until he came to the lights of a public house. The man drank the brandy which he procured, drowsily, a few drops at a time.

"I'm going to be all right," he murmured. "God! My head!"

They made their laboured way back through Hammersmith and Kensington. After they reached Hyde Park the fog was less dense, and progress comparatively easy. Mark pulled up by the side of the road.

"Look here," he suggested, "shall I take you to a hospital?"

His companion shook his head.

"Home, then? Tell me your name and where you are staying?"

There was still no reply. The man seemed to have relapsed again into a comatose state. Mark glanced thoughtfully across towards the hospital and remembered the questions he would probably have to answer. He started the car again, drove on to Curzon Street, and pulled up before the door of his own little *maisonnette*.

"Andrews," he told the servant, who answered his summons, "I have a gentleman in the car who has met with an accident in the fog. Help me in with him. We'll get him upstairs and then telephone for a doctor."

It all seemed perfectly natural. Within a few minutes the injured man was comfortably in bed, and shortly afterwards, in response to the telephone call, the doctor made his appearance.

"I picked this poor fellow up in the street," Mark explained. "I fancy he had been having a row with some one."

The doctor nodded.

"Any quantity of accidents a day like this," he remarked, commencing his examination. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"A complete stranger," Mark admitted. "I suppose I ought to have taken him to a hospital."

"Good thing you didn't," the doctor replied. "They're all chockfull. He's had a terrible knock here."

"Serious?"

"He'll be all right in a week. Touch and go, though. Better let me send in a nurse, if you don't mind, to dress this. She'll take all the responsibility."

"Fine," Mark exclaimed. "And, Doctor."

"Well?"

"There's no need for me to make any report, is there, about having found him? If he has any complaint to lodge against any one he can make it himself when he recovers."

"No need for you to do anything of the sort," was the prompt reply. "So far as I'm concerned, an accident in the fog is all I want to know. You weren't the aggressor, I suppose?" he added.

"I can assure you that I wasn't," Mark declared. "I couldn't hit anything that size."

The doctor paused to write out a prescription.

"I'll send a nurse in half an hour," he promised, "and I'll be round in the morning. Don't bother about the fee now. I'm busy. There'll be plenty of time for that later. He'll do nicely. I shouldn't be surprised if he slept."

The doctor took his leave and Mark, having rung for a servant to sit with the unconscious man, made his way downstairs into his own little library and threw himself into an easy-chair. Presently Andrews entered noiselessly, carrying a tray upon which were a glass and a cocktail shaker.

"A good strong Martini," his master ordered. "Tell me, what time is it?"

"Half-past six, sir. You'll excuse my reminding you that you're dining at the American Embassy. One of the secretaries rang up about an hour ago to ask you to be there at eight o'clock."

Mark drank his cocktail and took off the telephone receiver from the instrument by his side.

"One thousand Y Gerrard," he demanded.

A strange voice answered the call.

"Van Stratton speaking," Mark announced. "Are Mr. or Miss Dukane there?"

"Mr. and Miss Dukane have both left," was the prompt reply.

"Where are they? Where can I find them?"

"We have no information."

"But the matter is important," Mark confided.

"We have no information as to the whereabouts of either Mr. or Miss Dukane when they are not here."

"But I have information of the utmost importance for Mr. Dukane. You must tell me where to get at him," Mark persisted.

"Mr. Dukane has a private wire for his own use during the occasional hour or so a day which he spends here," was the uncompromising reply. "Apart from that his instructions are absolutely final. He is very much engaged and troubled with too much correspondence. He does not allow messages or his address to be given. Please ring off."

Mark abandoned his effort and lit a cigarette. Presently Dorchester was announced. He flung himself into an easy-chair with the air of one who was thoroughly at home.

"Your cocktails are better than any one's, Mark," he confided. "I couldn't help coming round, even in

this beastly fog. What did you think of our new friends at close quarters?"

"Well," Mark answered, "he seems just as disagreeable as he appears, and she just as charming."

Dorchester stretched out his hand and took a cigarette.

"The fellow's a big pot, you know."

Mark nodded. He was more in the humour for listening than talking.

"Tell you something I heard about him to-day," Dorchester went on. "Mind you, I don't know whether it's true or not. They say that he's been rather shy of the big things lately, gathering in his money from every quarter of the world. Do you know why?"

"Haven't the least idea," Mark acknowledged.

"They say," Dorchester continued impressively, "that it's his ambition to put Germany on her feet. That's his business over here in London. A banker told me this afternoon that if the Conference brings about this settlement, Dukane is prepared to engineer from the other side of the world the biggest loan that's ever been made to any government. He is going to find Germany the money to clear herself."

Mark was thoughtful for a moment.

"It's a large order," he commented.

"I believe my friend knew what he was talking about," Dorchester declared. "Of course, we want our money and France and Belgium want theirs, but on the other hand I am not sure that a Germany rehabilitated too soon and too completely would help towards the ultimate peace of Europe."

"Dukane hasn't any German antecedents, has he?" Mark enquired.

"I don't imagine so," Dorchester answered. "I should think he's simply out for an enormous *coup*. They say

that even the first of the Rothschilds never had a brain for finance like his. What about a round of golf to-morrow morning, if the fog lifts?"

Mark shook his head.

"I guess I'm through with that for a bit. Do I strike you as being cut out for a diplomatist, Henry?"

"No one on God's earth less so," was the fervent reply.

"No need to be rude about it," Mark complained. "Anyway, I'm roped in for the job. They are overworked at the Embassy, and I'm going to do the social stunt and any other odd piece of work that turns up. Start to-morrow. Room of my own, official air, lady secretary, edited visiting lists, shake hands with everybody. You know the sort of thing!"

"Keep you out of mischief, anyway," Dorchester observed doubtfully.

"You needn't be so beastly superior about it all," Mark protested. "I was in the service before the war began. I shall never forget the seven months I spent at a wretched little place in South America. By the bye, have you any idea where the Dukanes are staying?"

"Neither I nor any one else, I should think," Dorchester replied. "Not only his business transactions but his whole private life seems to be one huge camouflage. I wanted to have my people call, but it doesn't seem possible. I believe they move from hotel to hotel every day. What's doing to-night?"

"Dinner at Marsden House," Mark answered. "I've got to be there to have a talk with Mrs. Huventhayer first, too."

Dorchester finished his cocktail and rose to his feet.

"I shall be down at the House until late," he announced. "What's the hospital nurse doing on your stairs?"

"One of the maids has influenza," Mark answered coolly, as he rang the bell. "I think I was rather an ass

to take on a house. Service flats save you a lot of trouble. Sure you won't have another cocktail?"

Dorchester shook his head.

"Must keep my head clear," he confided. "The British public needs guiding and something tells me that to-night mine is the voice which will do it."

"You can't monopolise the House," Mark warned him, as they strolled into the hall. "You spoke a few nights ago."

"The voice of young England—" Dorchester began—"I say, what the devil's that?"

The door upstairs had been opened for a moment and the sound of a deep, troubled groan travelled out through the open space.

"My invalid, I suppose," Mark answered.

Dorchester shrugged his shoulders.

"Have all your maids bass voices?" he enquired, as he took his leave.

CHAPTER V

Mrs. Huventhayer possessed most of the qualities desirable in the wife of a popular Ambassador combined with a singular and entirely individual charm. She was inclined to be fussy about details, however, and Mark was a little relieved when his half hour's conversation with her before dinner was at an end.

"What about to-night's party?" he enquired.

"Quite informal," she answered. "There are only three interesting people. One is Baron Hustein, the Hamburg banker, over here to give evidence at the Conference."

"I have heard of him," Mark acknowledged. "He is one of the men the French nearly imprisoned."

Mrs. Huventhayer indulged in a little grimace.

"I know very little about him," she confessed, "and though I suppose it's silly nowadays I'm not very fond of entertaining Germans. George wished it, for some reason or other, however. Then the really interesting people are Felix Dukane and his daughter."

"You mean that they are coming here to-night?" Mark exclaimed breathlessly.

"They are coming quite informally," she confided. "We haven't even exchanged calls or anything. George has been asked from home to try to get some information from Mr. Dukane, and thought the simplest way was to ask him to dine."

"Shall I be seated anywhere near Miss Dukane?" Mark enquired.

She glanced at the list which lay upon the table.

"Opposite. We are so small a party that we have

only one married woman, so Miss Dukane has to sit on George's left. You don't know her by any chance, do you?"

"I met her at luncheon time."

"I have never even seen her," Mrs. Huventhayer admitted. "Is she attractive?"

"I should say so!" Mark replied, with restrained but obvious enthusiasm.

Mrs. Huventhayer glanced once more at the list.

"Sorry I can't put you on her other side, Mark," she observed. "It doesn't work out, though. It is one of the penalties of being something like an inmate of the household, as you will discover, that you have sometimes to make yourself agreeable to the dull people. However, you'll have a chance to talk to her afterwards. We must go down now."

In the drawing-room, Mark, as he talked on unimportant matters with Brownlow, was conscious of a sense of excited anticipation which almost bewildered him. His mind was suddenly full of impressions of the girl who had taken so unexpectedly such a large place in his life and thoughts. He pictured her as he had seen her for the first time, entering the restaurant, and recalled the curious thrill which had struck a new note amongst his emotions, which had kept him almost spellbound during their brief interview. Then he remembered the mute tenseness of her expression as she had turned round and half invited, half ordered him to take his place by her side in the automobile, and afterwards the breathless seconds in that strange sitting room, with the fog growing denser outside and the sense of tragedy within. Tonight, in a few moments—any moment—he would see her under entirely different conditions. He found his mind dwelling with singular persistence upon trifles: what coloured dress she would wear, how she would ar-

range her hair. Yet when she at last came into the room, followed by her father, he noticed none of these things. He knew later that she was wearing black, that her pearls were marvellous, that her hair lent itself naturally to the mode of the day. In those first few seconds of her coming, however, he could only realise with poignant disappointment that the very gracious smile with which she shook hands with the people presented to her passed almost entirely from her lips as their eyes met.

"You know Mr. Van Stratton, I believe," her hostess remarked.

"We met at luncheon to-day, didn't we?" she assented.

Mark muttered something conventional, and immediately afterwards dinner was announced. He took in Myra, the somewhat youthful daughter of the house, who had been his protégée since childhood, and did his best to listen to her rather voluble conversation. All the time he was puzzled, even distressed. The fascinating little smile which in conversation so seldom left Estelle's lips was absent, if by chance she looked across the table. Her eyes met his once and remained unmagnetic and indifferent. Once he ventured to address her, but her reply was monosyllabic. A few places from him Felix Dukane sat by his hostess's side, taciturn, almost morose, as he talked in a somewhat stilted fashion of subjects which he obviously found uninteresting. One of the other guests, conveniently placed for conversation with him, was a great English banker with an historic name, but all his attempts to discuss even indirectly the great problems of finance were absolutely unsuccessful. Dukane was living up to his reputation: a hard, impenetrable person, without the desire or the capacity for social intercourse. He was everything that might have been expected,—but his daughter! The more Mark considered

her manner, the more puzzled he became. At least she might have vouchsafed him one little kindly glance of understanding, even if she preferrd to ignore everything else. On the contrary when the women left the room she avoided his eyes with a persistence which sent him back to his place disheartened and depressed.

The after-dinner interval was fortunately short. Felix Dukane drank no wine and refused to smoke. In a few minutes his host rose to his feet.

"Mr. Dukane and I are going into the study," he announced. "You will perhaps join us, Baron, and you Mark, if you like, can come along too. You want to be off, I know, Brownlow. Mark can do anything necessary."

"If you wouldn't mind excusing me, sir," Brownlow assented. "Mrs. Huventhayer was anxious that I should take Myra on to the dance at Apley House."

Crossing the hall, Mark did his best to detach Dukane for a moment from the others but absolutely failed. There seemed to be some understanding between father and daughter to ignore utterly the happening of the afternoon. Mark relapsed into gloomy and silent resentment. At his Chief's request he passed round the cigarettes and cigars which were set out upon the sideboard and, helping himself to a liqueur brandy, took a seat in the background.

"I have been asked from Washington, Mr. Dukane," the Ambassador began, "to endeavour to approach you informally and enquire—still quite unofficially, of course —whether it is true that you are making arrangements in the United States to float a loan for Germany?"

"Whether I choose to do so or not," Dukane replied, "depends entirely upon the decision arrived at by the Whitehall Conference."

Mr. Huventhayer nodded.

"From what point of view," he enquired, "does that dependence arise?"

"Simply this," Dukane explained: "if the Conference fix upon a reasonable sum which Germany will be able to pay without being bled to death, I shall do my best to provide the money for the loan in question. If the terms mean, however, that France still keeps a strangle hold upon her and her industries, then I do nothing."

Mr. Huventhayer was thoughtful.

"Of course," he said, "the working of the Conference does not, strictly speaking, come within the sphere of my activities, although I am an ex-officio member. When you consider the amount, however, which may be decided upon, you must remember that Germany has already shown—more or less secretly, but shown it all the same —immense powers of recuperation."

"Why not?" Dukane observed coldly. "Germany is a vital nation, and although she is a beaten one, she has a right to exist. We all know the position, although some of us are like the ostriches and don't want to know it."

Baron Hustein, a grey, silent man, pallid-cheeked and thin-lipped, who up till now had kept silent, leaned a little forward in his chair.

"If France has her way," he said, "there will be no settlement; only more sabotage, more of this insane passion to taste the blood of an enemy. The only question to-day is whether the influence of France is strong enough to destroy the work of the Conference."

"I can scarcely discuss that matter," Mr. Huventhayer remarked, after a moment's pause. "The decision of the Conference will be announced in a very short time now."

"What I should like," Dukane confided, "is a copy of the proceedings, so far as they have gone. I could tell

then whether it is going to be worth my while to persist in the matter of this loan."

Mr. Huventhayer shook his head.

"The Conference sits, as you know, Mr. Dukane," he said, "*in camera*. Even the Press have not been allowed a hint as to any results which may have been arrived at."

Dukane's underlip seemed a little more protuberant than ever. He was clearly dissatisfied.

"In that case," he decided, "I have nothing to say with regard to any plans I may have considered for financing the first instalment of the reparation payment. There is no reason why I should be more loquacious than you and those who are responsible for these proceedings."

"The cases are scarcely parallel," Mr. Huventhayer ventured. "You are your own master as to what you disclose or what you keep secret. I, on the other hand, am subject to the obligations of my position."

"I was not asking for specific facts," Dukane pointed out. "A hint as to the course things are taking would be sufficient. How can I make my plans when I find it exceedingly difficult to obtain even the slightest information?"

"In any case," the Ambassador observed, "I am not the person to whom you should apply. I can introduce you to Lord Idrington, the Chairman, if you would care to meet him. The report itself, however, will be issued in less than a fortnight."

"I am unable to wait until the report is issued," Mr. Dukane declared. "There are certain decisions I have to come to at once."

Mr. Huventhayer smiled.

"You have the reputation of being able to acquire information in an amazing fashion, Mr. Dukane," he said,

"but I fancy that in this case you will have to wait for the official announcement."

Dukane glanced at the clock and rose to his feet.

"May I be allowed to pay my respects to Mrs. Huventhayer," he begged. "After that I shall, if you will permit me, take my leave. I am an early man and our discussion appears to have reached an *impasse*."

"I am sorry," Mr. Huventhayer regretted, as he threw open the door. "Washington would have liked a little information as to your plans, but you have the right of course to keep your own counsel."

"As you do yours," was the somewhat gruff rejoinder.

The drawing-room was unexpectedly empty when the three men reached it. Mrs. Huventhayer looked up from her writing desk.

"Your daughter has gone on to the ball at Apley House with Myra and Mr. Brownlow, Mr. Dukane," she announced. "I was to tell you that she would only stay an hour, and Mr. Brownlow will see her to your hotel."

Felix Dukane received the news without any sign of interest. Mark frowned gloomily. His hostess smiled at him.

"Why don't you go on there for an hour, Mark?" she suggested. "You're an official member of the household now, and we're all invited, if by any chance you didn't have a card of your own."

"Why, I'd like to," Mark assented eagerly, "if you're sure it would be all right."

There was a brief interchange of farewells. Afterwards Mark followed Dukane out into the hall, waited whilst he took his overcoat and hat from a servant and stood upon the steps with him.

"I have something to tell you, sir," he confided, under his breath. "Will you drop me at Apley House? It's only a short distance."

"You didn't fail, I hope?" Dukane asked, anxiously.

"It wasn't that," Mark replied, his voice a little unsteady with the import of the news he had to impart. "The fellow wasn't dead."

If the announcement was any relief to Felix Dukane, he certainly showed no signs of it. He stood for a moment perfectly still, drawing on his gloves and frowning gloomily. Then he motioned his companion to enter the car which had just drawn up.

"When did you find that out?" he demanded.

"Just as I was leaving him," Mark explained. "I got him out to Richmond Park all right, propped him up against a tree in a lonely place and was just starting in my car to drive away when he called after me."

"You had to go back, of course?" Dukane enquired bitterly.

"Why, of course I had!" Mark answered. "I couldn't leave him there to die."

"Rubbish!" Dukane exclaimed impatiently. "I told you what sort of a creature he was. What did you do with him then?"

"Well, I thought of a hospital," Mark confided, "but then I realised that there might be too many questions asked, so I took him back to my house. He has a doctor and a nurse, and is being well looked after there. They seem to think that he will be all right in a week or so. I'd have told you all this before but I couldn't get a word either with you or your daughter. I telephoned from Curzon Street, but your people would give me no information as to your whereabouts."

Felix Dukane scowled out into the darkness. He had the air of a man confronted with an ugly problem.

"My hand weakens with the years," he muttered. "If I had the chance again I would strike harder."

Mark felt a sudden impulse of revulsion against his

companion. He had expected relief and found nothing but a ferocious disappointment.

"Is there anything more you wish me to do in the matter?" he asked, as the car stopped before the great porticoed front of Apley House.

"Keep him where he is if you can, until I have made up my mind what to do," Dukane enjoined. "If you could prevent his communicating with any one so much the better."

"I'll do my best," Mark assented, a little dubiously, "but it's difficult in one's own house, and the man is still very ill."

"Difficult!" Felix Dukane repeated angrily. "You don't know what this means, what that man stands for. He is a venomous creature, a professional spy and blackmailer, but if he chooses, if he says the right word to the right person, this Conference at Whitehall you're all patting yourselves on the back about, might as well break up to-morrow. Where is your house?"

"Number 20b, Curzon Street," Mark replied.

Dukane nodded and turned away. Mark felt himself dismissed, and stepped out of the door of the limousine, which a footman was holding open. A moment or two later he was ascending the broad stairs of Apley House.

CHAPTER VI

Mark spent a disconcerting and profitless hour watching Estelle Dukane dance with others and avoiding so far as possible his own obvious duty that he might be free to claim her if ever the chance arose. At the end of that time, however, despairing of a better opportunity, he took his courage into his hands and boldly approached her as she sat with her partner in one of the anterooms.

"May I have this dance?" he asked.

Even whilst she was apparently hesitating, the music struck up. The natural thing happened. As soon as they were safely in the crowd he whispered in her ear.

"I have some news for you. I have told your father. Don't rush away directly this is over."

She looked up at him with a sudden disturbance in her eyes.

"You did not succeed?" she exclaimed. "You have bungled that affair perhaps?"

"So your father seemed to think," he replied a little bitterly. "I should have thought my news would have been good."

"Well?"

He waited for a moment until they were a little outside the throng.

"The man is alive," he confided. "He will probably live."

"Alive!" she repeated incredulously.

"He is at my house in Curzon Street now. He has a hospital nurse with him and the doctor says he will recover."

She seemed suddenly tired.

"Let us sit down," she suggested. "You dance very nicely, but this has upset me."

They found some chairs in a retired corner and she accepted a glass of champagne from a footman who was passing.

"Of course, in a way I am glad," she confessed, "and yet—well, it makes complications. What are you going to do with him?"

"What can I do?" he asked. "I shall keep him until he is well. Then he is free to go wherever he wishes. So far as I can tell, he does not seem vindictive. He has said nothing to the doctor about how he received his hurt and I have explained that I picked him up in the fog."

"No, I do not suppose he will tell," she reflected. "That is not the danger."

"Is he really what your father called him—a blackmailer?"

"One of the worst type," she answered. "And the trouble is that he has brains. He has accomplished a wonderful piece of work. I do not wish to talk of him any more for the present. I am anxious to hear what my father has to say."

There was a moment's pause.

"Do you care to dance again?" he ventured.

"Presently, perhaps," she promised. "I am a little upset. Go on talking—about anything."

"How is it that it is so difficult to see anything of you?" he asked. "Have you no house, no friends here?"

"Very few," she admitted. "London has never attracted me. We spend most of our time, when we are not travelling, in Paris."

"How do you amuse yourself? How do you pass the time here?" he enquired.

"Have you not guessed?" she replied. "I am my

father's confidante in everything he undertakes. He never plans an enterprise without talking it over with me."

"It seems a curious life for a girl like you," he observed. "To look at you and watch you dance, to watch you look round a room and talk to people in whom you are interested, one would think that you cared for nothing in life but pleasure."

"I have my moments," she answered. "The worst of it is that I never know when they will arrive."

"To-night, for instance?" he suggested.

"I came on here," she confided, "because I wished to meet a friend who has arrived in London. Lord Dorchester is trying to find him for me. If he succeeds you must go away at once, please."

"Who is he?" Mark asked irritably.

"Prince Andropulo of Drome," she answered. "I want to talk to him."

"Well, I hope Dorchester doesn't find him then," Mark declared, "because I want to talk to you myself."

"What about?" she asked. "You are not interested in finance, are you?"

"Is Prince Andropulo?" he rejoined.

She smiled.

"Perhaps not directly," she admitted, "but he will be king before long of an undeveloped country. My father thinks that with capital great fortunes could be made in Drome."

"I am not interested in making great fortunes, and even if I were, there are other things I would rather talk to you about."

"As, for instance?"

"Yourself."

She had relaxed a little and was leaning back in her chair. The air of aloofness which all the evening had

hurt and puzzled him had gone for the moment, and her eyes were watching him quizzically. Her smile mocked him.

"What interest can you have in me?" she demanded. "I have scarcely known you more than a few hours."

"I have this interest," he replied: "that some day I am hoping to marry you."

She laughed; gaily this time and without reserve.

"Delightful!" she murmured. "Now you are beginning to amuse me. I love this Anglo-Saxon candour. Would you be considered just a little premature, I wonder?"

"I am not making you a proposal," he reminded her, "unless you feel disposed to give me a little more encouragement. I am simply warning you that some day I shall. I felt it directly you came into the restaurant at the Ritz. I even ventured to say something of the sort."

"To Lord Dorchester and the Marquis de Fontanay?"

"Yes."

"You took rather a liberty, did you not?"

He shook his head.

"I don't think so. As a matter of fact, Henry Dorchester has pronounced himself my rival."

"A nice boy!" she murmured. "I have been dancing with him. He is not like you, though. He does not waste his time playing games. Even to-night he has been at work down in the House."

"I, too," Mark announced, "am a working man."

"Since when?"

"Since this morning. Not half an hour after I left you, Mr. Huventhayer asked me if I could come into the Embassy for a time. They are overworked there, and Dimsdale, one of the secretaries, has crocked up. I thought of your advice, and I didn't hesitate. All the same, it was rather a coincidence, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so," she admitted. "Are you going to work at the Embassy itself or with your representatives at the Conference?"

"I shall do whatever I am told," he answered. "So far my first job has been to go through a list of American tourists and discover which can be asked to a mere 'At Home', which must be asked to lunch, and which to dinner."

"It doesn't sound exciting," she laughed.

"Before you are snatched away from me, there is something I want to ask you," he begged. "I have been thinking about it all day. Was your advice to me altogether a coincidence?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, you spoke to me of what you call my idleness. You begged me if any work were offered to take it. Within an hour's time that work was offered. Had you any idea about it?"

"How could I have?" she rejoined. "I am a complete stranger to the Huventhayers. We dined there to-night only because Mr. Huventhayer wished to have an informal talk with my father."

"But I still ask you whether you had any idea?" he persisted, dimly apprehending a certain evasiveness in her manner.

She shook her head.

"You must not ask me silly questions. Be content with knowing that I much prefer you as you are. I like men who are workers. Many of the rich idlers of your sex who do nothing but hunt and shoot and play polo are picturesque enough but they are not my type. Now, shall I give you one more word of advice?"

"Do."

"If you have the choice, get attached to one of your representatives at the Conference. The work there is

serious and important and it ought to suit you because you look trustworthy."

"I certainly will if I can," he promised. "I think Dimsdale used to do some work for Hugerson down there in the afternoons. I may have a chance of taking his place."

"If that is offered, accept it," she begged earnestly. "Ah, here comes the man I want to see, at last!"

She looked across the room towards a sallow-faced man, young apparently, with black hair brushed smoothly back, dark eyes and a very bored manner. There was nothing in his dress to offend the *convenances* but there seemed to be a sort of orientalism about the size of his studs, the rings he wore on the little fingers of either hand. He had the face of a young man in the early thirties, but the heavier figure of a man ten years older."

"That is the Prince," she pointed out. "Get up at once, please. Go straight over to him and tell him that Miss Dukane wishes to speak to him. Hurry, please, before any one gets hold of him. And you had better stay away."

"Shan't I be allowed one more dance?" he pleaded. "And how are you getting home?"

"Mr. Brownlow and Miss Huventhayer have promised to drop me," she said. "You shall have another dance afterwards if it is possible, but do not interrupt me when I am talking to Prince Andropulo unless I call you."

Mark performed his errand and watched in the background whilst the Prince, who had hurried eagerly to Estelle's side, bent low over her fingers and raised them to his lips. His dark eyes glittered. It was obvious that the meeting was of import to him. Mark turned away with a black look upon his face. Myra Huventhayer, who was dancing with Brownlow, suddenly beckoned to him.

"Alan," she begged, "go and find another partner, there's a dear. We've had four running, and a girl in her first season can't be too careful. Come and dance with me, Mark, and tell me why this scowl?"

They moved off to the music, after a good-humoured protest from the discarded young man.

"Well, I don't know, Myra," Mark said. "I don't feel at my best to-night, and that's the truth. Am I getting too old, I wonder, for these big dances, where one knows so few people?"

"They aren't so much fun as the small ones," she admitted. "Tell me, what did you think of Miss Dukane to-night?"

"I found her very attractive," was his prompt reply.

"I think she is almost the prettiest girl I have ever seen," Myra decided, "and yet there is something about her face—what is it, I wonder?—which seems a little hard. I think it must be her mouth. One moment she is smiling and the next—well, those little lines looked to me as though they might be cruel. I am not at all sure that if I were a man I should care to be in love with her. Mark, shall I tell you a secret?"

"Go right ahead," he invited her. "Don't tell me that that forward brute, Alan Brownlow, has proposed to you."

She laughed.

"Nothing to do with me at all. It's about you yourself. I don't think it's really a secret, or I wouldn't dare tell you, and to-morrow you'll know, anyway."

"I'm getting terribly curious."

"I'm telling you," she went on, after a moment's pause, "because you look rather bored to-night, and it may interest you. Mr. Hugerson has asked Dad whether he can have you down at Whitehall to take Ned Dimsdale's place. Are you glad?"

Mark was a little startled.

"Extraordinary!" he muttered.

"Why extraordinary?" she asked. "I think it's very natural. From what Ned used to say about it, you don't have much to do except wait outside in the secretarial apartments with copies of reports and all sorts of documents in case they are wanted. It must be rather thrilling, though, to feel that you are within a few feet of the whole thing."

"With locked doors between," he reminded her.

"Never mind. Tell me what you think of it?" she begged.

"Why, there's no doubt about what I think of it," he assured her. "I shall like it."

"Don't know anything about it, to-morrow," she enjoined.

"I won't breathe a word," he promised. "You're a dear for telling me."

Alan Brownlow found them presently and they lingered for a few minutes in the refreshment room. Afterwards Mark strolled out and found Dorchester with De Fontanay. The three stood talking for a few minutes, Dorchester watching the dancers gloomily. Mark followed his eyes. Estelle was dancing with the Prince. De Fontanay smiled.

"So to-night, we watch the dance, my friends," he murmured.

Estelle passed them, apparently oblivious of their near presence, leaning back a little and laughing into her partner's face. Mark scowled openly. Dorchester frowned his disapproval. De Fontanay laughed softly.

"Idiots, both of you!" he exclaimed. "Can you not realise that there goes a woman who was born to break hearts?"

CHAPTER VII

Mark was a little shocked at his guest's appearance when in obedience to a somewhat urgent summons he presented himself in his room soon after ten o'clock on the following morning. The doctor had paid his visit and departed, leaving behind a fairly favourable report. The nurse, too, as she prepared to take her temporary leave, was encouraging.

"The doctor thinks that there is no longer any fear of a concussion," she confided, under her breath, as Mark held open the door for her. "He is very weak though, and seems dazed at times. He has always the fear of some unwelcome visitors. He likes to have the door locked."

Mark, after he had humoured the sick man's whim and secured the door, took a seat by the bed.

"Better not talk too much," he advised his guest. "That was rather a nasty crack you had."

"Do you know my name?" the other asked abruptly.

"No idea. Perhaps you'd better tell it to me in case there are enquiries."

"Brennan—Max Brennan. You can guess at my nationality."

"I should have thought that you were English, or perhaps colonial," Mark ventured.

"I am a German. My parentage, however, is somewhat mixed. My mother was a Russian and my grandfather an Armenian, I have in my veins the blood of the Slav, the Teuton and the decadent Asiatic."

"Then I congratulate you upon speaking a foreign language so perfectly. You have not even the trace of an accent."

"I had, but I have lost it. You see, I was one of those who practically made their homes in England before the war for a purpose. That's all over. My Secret Service work now is done in other directions. I set myself a few years ago a great task, and in that task I have succeeded—a little too well to please Felix Dukane. He is pledged to float that loan and he is crazy with fear of the revelations I might make."

"Secret Service work nowadays seems a little out of date," Mark remarked doubtfully.

The sick man turned a little impatiently in the bed. He looked at his host fixedly.

"Who and what are you?" he asked abruptly. "An American?"

"My name is Van Stratton," Mark replied. "I am an American, as you say."

"I think," Brennan continued, "that the Atlantic must be the widest ocean in the universe. It seems to keep so many of you Americans in a state of not understanding. Can you not realise that there are other wars waged than those which are waged with the paraphernalia of destruction—wars underneath the surface of society, quite as destructive as any campaign that was ever launched, only with different weapons? Propaganda instead of cannon; bribery instead of poisoned gas. You understand?"

"I should have thought that you were exaggerating, but I understand," Mark admitted.

"I have fought in those secondary wars all my life," Brennan confided, a little wearily. "I ought to know. They wouldn't even let me into the army. I was too valuable. They called me 'The Little Ferret.' There

wasn't much I couldn't find out once I had set my mind to it."

"Are you sure that you are not talking too much," Mark warned him. "The doctor seems to think that you're getting on very nicely, but you had a nasty knock, you know."

"I'll come to the point then," the other acquiesced, "although it is odd that my brain clears as I speak. What have you to do with Felix Dukane? How long have you known him?"

"A matter of twenty-four hours."

The man on the bed was plainly intrigued.

"You speak the truth?" he demanded.

"Why not? I was introduced to Mr. Dukane and his daughter after luncheon at the Ritz yesterday. An hour or so later she stopped her automobile in the Mall and invited me to enter. She brought me to Norfolk Street, told me that she and her father were in trouble and begged for my help."

"This is interesting," Brennan murmured. "Go on."

"Dukane thought that he had killed you. The idea was that I should take your body and leave it somewhere, where it might appear that you had met with an accident during the fog."

"That is all your acquaintance with or knowledge of the Dukanes?" Brennan persisted, almost incredulously.

"Absolutely."

He lay for a moment silent, with knitted brows.

"Can you explain then," he went on, "why they should have appealed to you for help of so extraordinary a character?"

Mark reflected for a moment. The man on the bed was beginning to interest him. He was evidently leading up to something. He decided to tell the truth.

"I think," he confided, "Miss Dukane realised that I

admired her very much and that I was likely to do anything she asked."

The sick man considered the reply thoughtfully.

"Yes," he observed, "that is reasonable enough. Estelle Dukane has turned a great many heads—broken a great many hearts, one could say, if it weren't that such things were out of date. For your own sake, young man, I hope that you are not serious."

"Why do you hope that?" Mark demanded.

Brennan raised himself a little in the bed. His thin, shapely hands fell one upon the other, as though to give weight to his words.

"Men and women," he confided, "I have studied all my life. In each woman I have found something good; in each—even the best of them—a little bad; but never before have I known a woman—a girl, for she is little more than that—with a stone in place of a heart. In appearance she is the beautiful image of her beautiful mother, who, although she was of Servian birth, was a Parisienne at heart. Inside, she is her father over again. You have done me a kindness, young man. I should do you a greater if you believed me. Her eyes may promise you the things you desire; her lips may even hint at them; she may have moments of curious kindness; but never for one second will her heart beat the faster for any man, never will the thrills of romance, the really beautiful things of life, take their place in her brain, as with other women when love comes. She is a schemer of her father's type, body and soul."

The man spoke almost fervently, and when he had finished, closed his eyes as though exhausted. Mark, dogged and unbelieving, nevertheless felt the chill of his words.

"Well," he said, "let that pass. Is there anything more you wanted to say to me?"

"Of course there is," was the almost impatient response, as Brennan raised himself once more in the bed. "I have sent for you because in this last great enterprise of mine I have played a lone hand and there is no one else in this country I could trust. I have to take a risk with some one. I am taking it with you."

"Better get on with it then," Mark begged. "I have to leave here in a few minutes."

"The doctor speaks hopefully," Brennan continued, "but I know something of surgery and anatomy. There are two things I fear—loss of memory or a long period of unconsciousness. Lest either of these should come to me, I have something to say to you. Are you listening?"

"Naturally," Mark assured him.

"Yesterday, I gave Felix Dukane the surprise of his life. I told him of my successful enterprise. I told him of the amazing discovery I had made—a discovery which would shock all Europe—and of the corresponding revelations which I was in a position to make. The fate of the world for the next twenty years depends not upon those sixteen men who sit round the Conference table at Whitehall but upon me—Max Brennan."

Mark looked at his companion a little incredulously.

"Isn't that going rather far?" he ventured.

"It is the plain, unvarnished truth," Brennan declared. "A dozen words from me and the proof, mark you—the proof which I hold—and the Conference would break up in disorder and Dukane's great scheme for the loan which was to astonish the world would vanish into thin air. He knows it. He never even for a second doubted my word. When I sought my interview I meant to sell it to him, and the little group who are most interested, for two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. That was my price. They would have given it to me, I am sure, but in his anger he lost control of himself. I spoke a

word he hates. He became for a moment a madman. He struck me with that loaded stick before I was prepared—and here I am."

"With information worth a fortune still in your possession," Mark observed.

"I said that I went to Dukane prepared to sell it for two hundred and fifty thousand pounds," the man on the bed declared. "It is worth countless millions. It is worth the future history of a nation. The publication or nonpublication of the facts which I have discovered would decide whether Germany is to start life again with a foot upon the ladder or to be further torn by the greedy fingers of France into a dishevelled and dismembered mass. If I die or if I lose my memory, I shall make you my heir. If I do not, for the present I keep my secret."

Mark looked at his companion a little anxiously. During the last few minutes he had grown even paler and his words were coming with more difficulty.

"See here," he advised, "you had better quit talking now. I'll come up again later on."

Brennan rolled up the sleeve of the pyjamas he was wearing. Above his elbow was a plain, heavy band of iron in the form of a bracelet with a flat top. He touched a spring and the latter rolled back. Inside was a key.

"This," he confided, "is a key of safe Number 323 in the Chancery Lane Deposit Company. Kindly oblige me by taking possession of it. If I lose my memory or die, fetch my papers, read them, realise that I have told you the truth and act as you will. It will be you then upon whom will rest the responsibility of deciding whether there be war or peace in the world for generations to come."

There was a knock at the door. Mark unfastened it and the nurse entered.

"I think," she said, "that our patient has perhaps talked long enough."

"Quite right," Mark agreed, as he prepared to leave the room.

The nurse bent over the bed, felt Brennan's pulse and moved towards the medicine bottle at the side of the bed.

"I'm all right," the latter murmured, with a sigh of relief. "I'm a little overtired, but I have no longer the great fear."

CHAPTER VIII

Mark found the world of affairs very much to his taste that morning. He had some work to do, simple but interesting, and the state of absorption into which it threw him was a distinct relief after the poignant sensations of the last twenty-four hours. He had no longer to fight angrily against what seemed to him in his saner moments an absolute obsession, no longer to spend his time sorting out the memory of a few kind words and glances from amidst a tangled mass of indifference. All his life women had spoilt him. He had every advantage in the world to offer and he had found the fact recognised. Now, for the first time, he was confronted with an entirely altered situation. Even a brief period of forgetfulness was welcome.

Towards the end of the morning Mr. Huventhayer came unexpectedly into the room where Mark was working, accompanied by a small, rather shrunken man, pallid, with smoothly brushed grey hair and keen eyes imperfectly concealed behind gold-rimmed spectacles. His appearance, though by no means insignificant, gave no indication of the fact that here was one of the most brilliant brains of the western world.

"Good morning, Mark," the Ambassador greeted him, as the former rose to his feet. "Well, how's the work going?"

"Quite all right, thank you, sir," was the prompt reply. "I don't think that I have made an absolute hash of anything yet."

Mr. Huventhayer turned to his companion.

"Mark," he continued, "I want you to know Mr. Hugerson, the senior representative of the United States at the Whitehall Conference."

"Glad to meet you, young man," Mr. Hugerson said, as Mark came forward and they shook hands. "I used to know your father well. He wasn't quite such a giant as you, but he was a pretty useful half back in my last year, and he developed a wonderful head for figures later on in life. Seems to me," he added good-humouredly, "I have heard of you more as a sportsman than as a diplomat."

"I am afraid that may be so, sir," Mark admitted deprecatingly. "I am very glad to have made a start here, though, even if it is rather late in life."

"Work's good for all of us," Mr. Hugerson declared. "I'm sixty-three and I have never stopped. I don't imagine really that the men of our race have the instinct for leisure. You pick it up like a germ on this side, if you stay over long enough."

"I think I have a little of my father coming out in me," Mark confessed. "I know I'm going to enjoy work, if I'm kept at it."

"Oh, we'll make use of you all right," his Chief promised, "if we only keep you as a chucker-out. We get shorter-handed here every day. You know Rawlinson's laid up with the 'flu', I suppose?"

"I heard so this morning, sir."

"I was speaking to Mr. Hugerson here about a substitute for him, and he seems to think that he could get on with any one so long as he just tabulated the documents required each day and brought them in to the room as he asks for them. Do you think you would like to take Rawlinson's place for a day or so down at Whitehall?"

"Nothing I'd like better, sir," Mark declared promptly, "if Mr. Hugerson thinks I could handle it. I'll do my best, of course."

"Why, I'm perfectly willing to take a chance on that," Mr. Hugerson announced. "For the next few days we're all on bank returns. Some of those German figures are pretty amazing! One or two of the balance sheets which have been issued publicly—but there, I mustn't talk, even amongst ourselves. I never was altogether a diplomat myself. Figures have been my joy in life and my hobby."

"The whole world knows that, sir," Mark acknowledged.

Mr. Hugerson smiled.

"Unromantic things, I suppose they must appear to the uninitiated," he continued, turning to the Ambassador, "and yet if ever our full reports are published, Huventhayer, let me tell you that there isn't one of the wildest fiction writers in the world who has ever used his imagination more than some of our friends. You can put words together and make either a poem or a lampoon, and with the same figures you can build either a dancing saloon or a cathedral. I'll be glad to have you down at Whitehall, Van Stratton. Jove, how I used to admire your father! He had a wonderful head for figures, as I said, but he was a greater athlete than mathematician."

"You coxed your boat, sir, the year they beat Yale," Mark reminded him.

"Bully for you, my boy!" the other declared. "George, this lad's got the makings of a diplomat in him. He remembers the right things."

"Come along and have luncheon, Mark," the Ambassador invited. "I'll tell you the few things you have to remember about Whitehall later in the day."

Myra, next whom Mark sat at luncheon, was inclined to be admonitory.

"One dance the whole of last evening," she reminded him, "and I am your Chief's daughter! Do you call that diplomacy? You really ought to have devoted yourself altogether to me with a view to rapid promotion."

"One couldn't get near you," he grumbled.

"You should have arranged with me beforehand."

"But I didn't know that I was coming until the last minute," he reminded her. "It was your mother who suggested it. You know I hadn't an invitation of my own at all."

"You and Lord Dorchester were equally bad," she complained fervently. "You both of you stood about and gazed at that little Dresden doll beauty, Estelle Dukane. Lord Dorchester did his duty by me, though. I wish he danced as well as you."

"When do we have another opportunity?" Mark enquired.

"That will come soon enough. The only thing is whether you'll be able to keep your eyes off that amazing young woman, and devote yourself a little more to me. Mother," she went on, "have you heard the awful thing that's happened to Mark? For the first time in his young life I believe that he has lost his heart."

"To you, I hope, dear," her mother remarked pleasantly. "I think you'd make an admirable son-in-law, Mark."

"I'm always hoping," he confessed, "but you can't marry in the nursery. Grow up a little, Myra dear, and learn to talk seriously."

"That's all because I discovered his secret," she laughed. "Never mind! I should make you a much better wife, and it seems to me that she's got what I call a bizarre taste in men. When we wanted to bring her home

she went off with that Eastern prince—after dancing with him half the evening too."

Mark felt a ridiculous sinking of the heart. The question he had been longing to ask was answered to his misery.

"I wondered what had become of you all," he admitted. "I danced once with Edna Worthington. Then she wanted a sandwich or something, and when we got back you'd all disappeared."

"How you must have cursed the girl who wanted a sandwich or something at the wrong time!" Myra exclaimed. "I don't believe you enjoyed yourself a bit last night."

"Is she allowed to come down to all her meals?" Mark asked his hostess.

"It wouldn't help you if I weren't," Myra retorted promptly. "I should invite you up to the nursery and you'd have to come, because your object now is not to play back for America against England for the third year in succession but to develop your career. Your future is practically in my hands. I can do anything with father on his good days, and this is the great thing —I know which are his good days."

"Talking a lot of nonsense up there, aren't you?" Mr. Huventhayer remarked from the end of the table.

"Nonsense is the only possible form of conversation when you have for a neighbour a young man who is in love with some one else," Myra expounded. "Father, what sort of a wife do you think a rising young diplomat ought to have?"

"Not a chatterbox," was the severe reply.

Myra sighed.

"Oh, well, I'll leave you alone, Mark," she promised. "They're all against me. Pax, if you'll take me to the *Thé Dansant* at Claridge's to-morrow afteroon."

"My dear child," he remonstrated, "fancy suggesting a *Thé Dansant* in the middle of the day to a man immersed in immense affairs. I don't know what my new hours really are, but I imagine if I have time to change for dinner once or twice a week it is as much as I can expect."

Myra made a little grimace.

"I always understood," she complained, "that it was the first duty of the younger and more ornamental members of the profession to be at the service of their Chief's daughter. However, I daresay as Mr. Brownlow has only been here three years longer than you and is clever enough to be an ambassador himself, he'll find time somehow. Every one is neglecting me. Now I hear that Archie Rawlinson, the only person in London I can tango with, has got the 'flu'."

The hurried entrance of Brownlow himself interrupted the conversation. He apologised first to Mrs. Huventhayer, and leaned over his Chief's chair with a slip of paper in his hand. The Ambassador adjusted his glasses, glanced at it, and nodded.

"Foreign exchanges all wobbly," he announced, with a glance at Hugerson.

"Humph!"

There was a brief silence. Mr. Hugerson stroked his chin thoughtfully. It was obvious that some unspoken thought had presented itself simultaneously to the two men.

"Furthermore," the Ambassador continued, as he tore the slip of paper into pieces, "our friend the money wizard, Felix Dukane, requests a further interview. Did you arrange anything, Brownlow?"

"I told him I thought three o'clock this afternoon, sir. You're free until four."

"At Carlton House Terrace, I suppose?"

"He wished to come here, sir."

Hr. Huventhayer nodded.

"Very well, then, I shan't turn out till afterwards," he decided. "More comfortable for me, anyway. He'll probably arrive down the chimney, or in a taxicab at the servants' entrance. Hugerson, you ought to know that man."

"Sure," was the prompt assent. "I'm all set to meet him. It was you yourself who pointed out that America's financial representative at the Conference ought not to meet the world's greatest financier, who is looking for business, in the middle of the show."

"I guess you're right," Mr. Huventhayer admitted regretfully. "You're not missing anything, my friend—not in the way of grace of manner or personality, or conversation—but there's no doubt about the man's financial genius. Other men can talk money. He can produce it. Of course, we know what he's up to now, more or less, but he wants to be on the safe side according to the findings of the Conference. That's why he's all the time fencing with me. Fortunately there's a clear line. So much may he know and no more."

"The day after I sign our report and we break up this show," Mr. Hugerson declared, "I insist upon meeting the man."

"You shall," the Ambassador promised. "You shall also meet the prettiest girl I ever saw in my life—his daughter."

Myra sighed.

"A pity about Father," she whispered to her neighbour. "Since he met Mother and I did him the honour to become his daughter he seems to have lost his taste. Do you think she is the prettiest girl you ever saw in your life, Mark? Look well at me before you answer."

"I'm afraid I do," he admitted.

Myra reached across the table for a chocolate and sighed once more.

"After this," she murmured, "it is either back to the nursery for me or a nunnery. Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless I can convert either you or Lord Dorchester. I should prefer you, because you know all the new steps, but nowadays girls can't choose."

The Ambassador left the room arm in arm with Hugerson. His face was a little grave. He had not disclosed everything which had been written upon that slip.

"James," he confided, "there is some one trying to play the devil with us at the Conference. Poor young Dimsdale threw himself overboard last night, directly the steamer left Southampton, and this morning one of the Italian secretaries blew his brains out just as they were about to arrest him."

"Guess I'm glad I'm going to have Mark Van Stratton," Mr. Hugerson observed laconically.

CHAPTER IX

MARK, as he swung round the corner from Queen Street that evening in his two-seated Rolls-Royce, found the space in front of his house taken up by a large limousine. He pulled up behind and, opening the door with his latchkey, was confronted with an utterly unexpected spectacle. In the little semicircular white stone hall, Estelle Dukane was standing, engaged in what seemed to be almost a heated colloquy with Andrews. In the background stood Robert, holding tenaciously to the banisters; halfway up the stairs, the nurse. At the sound of the opening of the door, a look of relief was immediately visible on the faces of all three. Estelle turned lightly round. For a moment Mark almost failed to recognise her. She was angry, and most of her charm seemed to have disappeared with the tightening of the mouth, the cold blaze of the eyes. In a single moment it was back again, however. She held out her hand and laughed.

"My friend," she complained, "your servants are very rude to me. They will not let me have a single word with the poor man upstairs, who happens to be a friend of mine, and whom I am so anxious to see."

Mark handed his hat and cane to Robert.

"I am so sorry," he apologised, "but our invalid is not allowed to see any one. The doctor was insistent."

"Ah, well, if I may not, I may not," Estelle observed with a little shrug of the shoulders. "So this is your house, Mr. Van Stratton," she continued, looking around

at the choice engravings upon the walls, the heavy rugs and the masses of palms and flowers. "Very charming!"

"You'll come in for a moment," he begged, throwing open the door of his library.

"Why not?" she assented. "If you would like to be very sweet will you offer me some tea? My head aches. Everything annoys me. Your servants were so stupid."

He followed her into the room, installed her in his easy-chair, rang the bell and ordered tea. She loosened her fur coat, abandoned it altogether at his suggestion, and let him take it from her. She was wearing a silk knitted gown of soft grey, and as she leaned back in the depths of the chair her body seemed more than ever the body of a very young girl. From under the shaded lamp, however, she looked at him with the eyes of a woman who mocks.

"Well," she asked, "aren't you surprised to find me here?"

"Surprised and very happy," he answered.

She suddenly frowned.

"I wanted to see that man," she declared. "I wanted to see him very much. Is he going to live or die?"

"I think that he will live," Mark assured her. "He is in danger of an illness, however. That is why he must not be seen."

She made a little grimace.

"That may be one reason. There is probably another."

"Well, it is his own wish," Mark confided. "He insists upon keeping his door locked, and he is in my house as a guest. When I think how nearly I dumped him in Richmond Park and left him there to die, I feel that I owe him a little."

"The blame would not have been yours," she reminded him. "It would have been ours. He is of that class of men who take their lives into their hands and deserve

death at any moment. It is odd that you should defend him—against me too."

"What do you want of him?" Mark enquired. "His life?"

"Not at all," she replied coldly. "I am quite indifferent as to whether he lives or dies. I simply want the information which he came to sell and which my father ought to have secured at any price. May I smoke?"

He gave her a cigarette—the best brand in the world—from a sandalwood box covered on the outside with gold filigree work of a wonderful design, and lit it from a softly burning Turkish lamp. She leaned back in her easy-chair with a little murmur of content. Her eyes travelled round the room and became lit with a faint surprise.

"Did you take this house furnished?" she enquired.

He shook his head.

"No, I furnished it myself. I don't like living amongst other people's things."

"Why, you're quite an artist!" she exclaimed. "Your bronzes are all beautiful. That Psyche is amazing, and those two ivories—perfectly placed and wonderful work. Your dry points too. Who told you that that little man Daunont was the most wonderful creature in the world?"

"I liked them," he replied. "I bought them before he was famous."

"And your colouring," she went on in a tone of satisfaction. "A deep green is so restful. It suits me too. Not a single piece of your furniture wrong! I shall have to correct my impressions of you, Mr. Van Stratton. I thought that you were a great, rather clumsy athlete, beautifully strong and picturesque—oh, yes, quite attractive in your way, but also—well, a little difficult for us people who have French blood to appreciate. But I'm getting to like you better. You must have taste.

And these books too! Do you read Verlaine and Gautier? The volumes seem well-worn."

"French is my only accomplishment," he confessed. "I lived in Paris for so long."

"Certainly I must change my point of view," she decided. "I'm getting to like you better every moment. If there is really anything good to eat for tea I shall be in danger—grave danger!"

Almost as she spoke Andrews entered solemnly, followed by his underling. Together they arranged a table drawn up to the fire. Estelle laughed with an air of almost feline content.

"These dear little muffins!" she exclaimed, as the men left the room. "And what cakes! My head is being turned, Mr. Van Stratton. You are apparently a man of understanding. Why did I not know last night when I did not wish to dance with you that you had a room like this and read Verlaine, and could give me such a tea?"

"I can give you many more such surprises," he assured her. "I have a really beautiful house, or rather a villa, at Beaulieu, and, although I suppose you would never go there, I have a house in New Hampshire which is quite a show place."

"Paris?" she enquired.

"A bachelor apartment only. Fortunately I am not tied to any place or country. When you make up your mind to marry me it will be for you to decide."

"Marriage," she declared, stretching out her hand for another muffin, "is a very serious thing."

"For a woman," he rejoined, "it is inevitable. Life for a man as a bachelor is possible. For a woman, spinsterhood is sheer barbarity."

She leaned back in her chair and reflected. There was an abandon about her pose which stirred him to a

vague uneasiness. More than once he had fancied that it amused her out of sheer perversity to affect an unnatural rôle. It was as though she had detected and found pleasure in mocking at a certain strain of inherited Puritanism the remnants of which he still possessed.

"I puzzle myself," she admitted. "I believe I am a woman as others—sometimes, alas, I know it—and yet I dread marriage. Marriage is the end of all individuality, especially—forgive me—with men like you. You are what I should call enveloping. You would leave me scarcely a breath in my body, or a thought in my brain, and I want to live and think for myself. Life just now with me is, as it has been during the last four years, a huge and fascinating picture puzzle. They may be my father's fingers that move the pieces, but I too watch. I see many things that he overlooks."

"But what does it all lead to?" he asked curiously. "You don't want money. You have all the money in the world now, they say. Personally, I am sorry to hear it. I have enough for both of us. What is the end and aim of it all?"

She laughed, her head thrown back; the laugh with its spice of mockery which he half loved and half hated.

"One has to go back to the kindergarten to talk to you sometimes," she declared. "That is because you have only one idea—the idea to marry me. It is flattering, but it closes your eyes. Think now. You shall have a simile which appeals to you. You risk your life going into the bush to kill tigers. The actual killing is nothing. You go for the tracking, for the sport of it, for the thrill when you raise your rifle, the danger if you miss, the added thrill of success when you kill. What is the skin to you? What the dead body? Nothing. It is the environment that counts. So it is with me and my life. I live by my father's side. One day we are in

New York. There comes another and we are in Constantinople. We find ourselves in Paris or Madrid. We loiter incognito in Berlin, and all the time we are in touch with great things. Because you see, after all, money is a great thing. Every human being, every commercial undertaking, every nation wants money. We watch and scheme. We listen. We choose our time of advantage and there is no single bank in Europe can compete with us. There is the pulse of power in such a life."

"Well," he sighed, "I can't argue. I can only tell you that it seems like this to me: that your sense of values is wrong. You are devoting your life to a sport which is scarcely a sport at all. Finance may be attractive to a certain type of brain, but it has nothing to do with the world beautiful. You have. You are laying a crust over yourself day by day, in an unwholesome quest. Turn your thoughts somewhere else. Try to live for once in beautiful places and amongst beautiful things. Give your life to me and I promise that I will put it to better use."

"Sometimes," she confessed, setting down her empty teacup, and selecting a cigarette, "you astonish me. There must be something in you, Mr. Mark Van Stratton, which I have not yet appreciated. Do you know," she went on, "I have always rather prayed that a god might come down to earth and lift my feet and myself right above it. I have not seen any signs of him yet. Do you think that you might be that god?"

"I am," he assured her. "They say that love makes men like gods, and no one could love any one as I love you."

"I cannot remember," she reflected, "that you have before mentioned the fact."

"That is because I know that there is nothing so wearisome in this world as for a woman who does not love

to be told of his love by a man who does," he answered promptly.

"You read too much fiction," she declared.

"I don't read half a dozen novels in the year."

"Anyhow, you have me in the wrong perspective," she persisted. "As I am at present I am a hopeless person. I may change. When I was a child I was different. I even believed in fairy stories. I may believe in them again. Just now I do not. I am full of other thoughts."

"What sort of thoughts?" he enquired.

"I want that man upstairs to die," she answered, "or I want that document he carries about with him."

"Why is this such an urgent need?" he ventured.

"Because I want to help on a little the greatest scheme we—that is, my father and I—have ever conceived," she replied. "There is practically only one thing in the world which could wreck it, and that is the secret which that man has fathomed, and my father was mad to lose his temper at that particular moment. You said just now that I did not love you. You were perfectly right. I do not. Then, on the other hand, I love no one else, and love might come any day. It might even come along the highroad of gratitude. You could help me if you would."

"The man upstairs is my guest," he said, with a certain sternness. "He is safe where he is until he is able to fend for himself."

"You should make no mistake," she expostulated. "I wish him no personal harm. My father has a violent temper, or we should not be in this difficult position. He would not listen to my father now, but he might to me. I wish to obtain possession of his papers, either by strategy or to buy them. Take me up to his room, Mr. Mark Van Stratton. Let me speak to him."

"I cannot do that," Mark replied regretfully.

"Not even when it is I who ask you this as a favour?"

"Not even when it is you."

There was a brief silence. Her face had grown hard. He saw lines about her mouth which he had never noticed before. She threw her cigarette into the fire.

"I do not know why I waste my time here with you then," she observed curtly.

"Out of your kindness, I hope," he ventured. "Because you know that your being here has given me so much pleasure."

She listened without a smile, without an answering look.

"Has he made you the trustee of his secret?" she demanded suddenly.

"Under certain conditions," he acknowledged, "it will come into my hands. If he loses his memory or dies, I am to become his legatee, and," he added, "I shall be a faithful one."

She shook some cigarette ash from her gown as she rose to her feet.

"Whereabouts amongst the treasures of your life," she asked coldly, "do you rank this love of yours of which you speak?"

"Next to my honour and to that small amount of conscience which every man is allowed to have," he answered, "and only next because a stain on one would be a stain on the other."

She held out her arms for her coat.

"Decidedly," she admitted, "you are not quite what I anticipated. I am very angry with you, but some day I honestly believe that I may marry either you or your friend, Lord Dorchester. Last night I thought it would be he. This afternoon you have been so brutal to me that I think it may be you. Tell me how your career in diplomacy progresses?"

"I have made the most rapid advancement of modern times," he confided. "Yesterday I was an assistant tame cat, a maker-out of dinner lists, a possible chucker-out. To-morrow I attend at Whitehall. I am going to do secretarial work for Mr. Hugerson, one of our two representatives at the Conference."

She suddenly let slip the coat which he was in the act of folding round her.

"You speak the truth?" she demanded.

"Absolutely," he assured her. "Mr. Hugerson is one of my father's oldest friends. Rawlinson, the man who was looking after him, has fallen sick. I am to take his place."

"Decidedly," she murmured once more, "the chance grows that one day I may marry you."

His arms slid round the shoulders of her smooth sable coat, in which she was now enveloped. For a moment it seemed as though she were yielding. The arms crept further, further. She was imprisoned, yet apart from him by reason of her head thrown back, the warning in her eyes.

"Not just yet, please," she begged, laughing up at him. "Ring, please, for your servants. That poor Prince Andropulo! I forgot all about him. He waits outside in the car."

CHAPTER X

MARK's first day at the great International Conference, whose labours were drawing now towards a close, was interesting but scarcely exciting. He was given a room to himself, but he spent the whole morning in an office with two of the clerks from the Embassy, arranging in sequence the various papers for which Mr. Hugerson was likely to ask. After lunch he moved into his own little apartment which had direct communication with the Conference chamber, although the double doors shut out every sound of the debate which was going on inside. Towards the middle of the afternoon, however, there was the sound of a key turning in the lock and the communicating doors were thrown open. An ex-secretary of the Chairman, who was acting as usher to the proceedings, looked into the room.

"Mr. Van Stratton?" he enquired.

Mark stood up and nodded.

"Mr. Hugerson wishes you to take in to him the 'B' lot of reports on German banking since 1923."

Mark sorted out one of his batches of papers, and for the first time crossed the charmed portals. He stood for a moment looking about him whilst his guide locked the door. There was Lord Idrington in the chair at the top of a long table, and gathered round him the various representatives of France, Italy, Belgium and the United States. In the background, at a side table, three shorthand writers were at work; one a woman—pale,

anæmic-looking, with large, dark eyes, and a discontented mouth. There was something almost contemptuous in her attitude during this brief lull in the proceedings, as she leaned back in her chair, making little sketches on the cover of her book. Seated in a somewhat isolated chair which did duty as a witness box was an obvious German —a hard, dour-looking man, who held a sheaf of papers in his hand with the help of which he had apparently been replying to questions. Mr. Hugerson took the reports from Mark's hand and glanced them through approvingly.

"That seems all right," he observed. "You've got them in the proper order, I see. There are a few little points here I shall have to discuss with our friend."

He selected one of the sheets and rose to his feet, glancing tentatively towards Mark. The latter, escorted as before, quickly gained the shelter of the outside room. The key was turned in the lock. The mumble of voices began once more. Brownlow, who had strolled in to visit Mark, nodded a greeting.

"So you've seen the great spectacle," he remarked. "What do you think of it?"

"Well, I guess you fellows are used to that sort of thing," Mark replied hesitatingly. "It's an ordinary sight enough, of course—ten men seated round a long table. All the same it gave me a thrill. It's a big job they're tackling."

Brownlow nodded.

"If they succeed," he said, "Europe will be on its legs again. We shall have the greatest boom on this side of the Atlantic that's ever been known."

"I can't see that there's much to stop their succeeding," Mark observed hopefully. "The conditions were that a majority vote should be accepted. That seems to make a certainty of the affair."

"It's a huge game of bluff," Brownlow declared. "The one who has the most patience will win."

"It's ten to one on the Teuton then," Mark predicted. "Tell me, who's the young woman in there?"

"Official shorthand secretary to the whole Conference —Miss Frances Moreland," Brownlow replied. "A very wonderful young woman of her sort. She has been private secretary to two or three cabinet ministers and one Prime Minister, and never been known to make a mistake. See you later! I thought I'd just pay my respects. My room is across the way."

He strolled out and Mark busied himself with the rearrangement of his papers. Presently the key turned in the door. The young woman of whom they had been speaking—Frances Moreland—entered, with some sheets of paper in her hand.

"Are you Mr. Van Stratton?" she enquired.

"I am," Mark assented, rising.

"Mr. Hugerson wishes you to compare these statements from the last witness with the official report you have from the Erste National Bank in Berlin, and note any differences in the margin."

"How am I to get the papers in to him?" Mark asked.

"I shall wait here for them. There is a quarter of an hour's interval."

"Won't you sit down," he begged.

She sank a little listlessly into the chair which he placed for her. She was dressed with the severe simplicity of the official woman—a plain dark gown, unrelieved even at the neck. Her hair was of a very dark brown shade, almost black, and notwithstanding some slight irregularity of feature was brushed severely back from a high forehead. Her eyes were large and almost beautiful and her eyebrows faint lines of silk. Her mouth, although in itself it was shapely, was discontented and ungracious,

her cheek bones slightly prominent, her figure unduly thin. Her silk stockings seemed to be a concession to the demands of the time and she wore shoes heavy enough for the country with low heels. Her hands were well cared for and remarkably well-shaped, her fingers long and capable.

"It seems too bad," she remarked presently, "to keep you out here. I am sure there has been very little in the evidence so far which might not have been handed on to the Press. It is only the discussion between the members of the Conference after the final examination of witnesses which seems to require such rigorous secrecy."

"Well, I'd rather like to hear what's going on, and that's a fact," Mark confessed, "although you don't seem to find it particularly exhilarating."

"I don't," she admitted. "All the German witnesses adopt the same tone. It's a game of wrangling and arguing all the time. Have you finished?"

Mark handed her back the sheets upon which he had noted a few figures. She glanced at them and nodded approvingly.

"Yes, that seems to be all right," she said. "By the bye, don't be surprised if they send for you to bring your papers inside at any moment. Mr. Hugerson is trying to arrange it during the interrogation of witnesses, at any rate."

"I hope I shan't be as bored as you," Mark observed, with a smile, as he rose to his feet.

She looked up at him with a gleam of admiration in her eyes. A being of an extraordinarily different world! His virility and good looks seemed for a moment almost to fascinate her.

"Why should you be bored with anything?" she asked. "Everything is new to you. Even this is only a hobby. You have your life of amusements outside. A working-

woman, as a rule, has to give up everything for her work. Only a man can combine."

Mr. Hugerson, smoking a cigarette, appeared in the doorway. Behind him was a little vista of the Conference chamber, one or two members leaning back in their chairs, some drinking tea, all relaxed.

"My young friend, you are to come inside," he announced. "There is a desk for you next to Miss Moreland's. It will be more convenient as I am certain to need some more of your papers before very long. When we come to the summing-up, you'll have to clear out."

Frances Moreland handed him the sheets which Mark had given her. He glanced at them and frowned.

"Just what I expected," he observed. "Come along, Van Stratton, and I'll show you where you sit."

Mark, with his despatch box in his hand, entered the room and took his appointed place. In a few minutes another German banker was ushered in and was examined with the help of an interpreter. Mark found the report of the bank with which he was connected, laid it by his side ready, in case it was required, and then devoted himself to listening. For half an hour came question and answer; keen, logical questions from the President, astute enquiries now and then from Mr. Hugerson, sometimes a sarcastic intervention from one of the French representatives, always indignant responses from the witness. After a time Mark began to feel restless. The whole thing was outside his grasp; the boredom of this mass of incomprehensible figures began to weigh upon him. He watched his neighbour with spellbound eyes. She had two sheets of paper and a notebook and her fingers moved from one to the other with amazing, lightning-like precision. A stream of figures flowed from her pencil on to one piece of paper, then on to another; sometimes a cryptic word or two into the book. Once she

caught his eyes and frowned, so that he turned away with a sense almost of guilt. Nevertheless her activities fascinated him.

"You can put those papers away," she told him. "They have finished with this witness."

Mark looked up at the newcomer and stared at him in surprise. It was Felix Dukane who had entered the room, escorted by the secretary to the Conference. He sank into the easy-chair and looked around him with cool curiosity. His replies to the President's questions were terse and his voice sounded harsher than ever.

"Mr. Felix Dukane, you are, I believe, an English subject?" was the first question.

"I am."

"And you are considered a world authority upon banking matters."

"I have had great experience."

"We are not going to trouble you at any length," Lord Idrington continued smoothly. "It would scarcely be fair to ask you here, and then take up your time with matters of detail. It is your advice and opinion as a man of great experience which the Conference requests. Would you care to commit yourself to any definite sum which from your knowledge of the financial condition of Germany you believe she might be able to pay within the next forty years?"

Out came Felix Dukane's underlip. He stroked it thoughtfully. His reply was slow and considered.

"Germany could pay a great deal," he said, "if she were treated as civilised countries should treat a civilised foe. There is in Germany to-day an absolute indisposition, a lack of desire to pay anything. That arises from the bitter resentment amongst the people at the ignominious way in which she is being treated. With the chief of her industries paralysed why should she strug-

gle? With the soldiers of her most hated foe flaunting themselves in her streets, framing her laws, terrorising her work people, why should she seek to rekindle her spirit of emulation, of desire for freedom, which might easily lead her on to great things? Let the Allies clear out behind their portals or undertake to do so definitely with the first payment, and I imagine that Germany could find a matter of several thousand millions with a substantial sum in cash for a first instalment."

"A first instalment in cash?" the President repeated. "Do you think that would be possible?"

"She would have no difficulty," Felix Dukane asserted, "in raising a loan of a thousand millions."

"May I ask in what direction?" the President enquired.

"That is not a question which I can answer," was the curt reply. "I have told you my opinion."

Lord Idrington bowed.

"I shall not trouble you any further, Mr. Dukane," he said. "We are very much obliged for your attendance. What you have told us we consider to be of much value."

Dukane rose to his feet, returned Lord Idrington's salutation with stiff formality and walked to the door, escorted again by the secretary of the Conference, looking neither to the right nor to the left. From her place Frances Moreland leaned forward and watched him with a curious intentness. As soon as the door had closed there was a little buzz of conversation. Every one seemed to be talking at the same time. The few terse sentences to which they had listened had certainly been the most momentous which had been spoken since the opening of the Conference. One of the two French representatives who had been talking angrily to his neighbour rose suddenly to his feet.

"Mr. President," he said, "I take the liberty of say-

ing that I object to the questions put to the last witness, or rather to his replies. This is a financial Conference and not a political one. I do not consider it comes within the scope of this Conference to discuss or express its opinion upon the matter of the occupation of any part of Germany which the Government of my country may consider necessary for her protection and safety."

Lord Idrington nodded in soothing fashion.

"I invited only a statement of opinion from Mr. Dukane," he explained, "and his reply must be looked upon in that light. At the same time, you must realise that it is very hard to dissociate altogether the political and the financial situations. Mr. Dukane's remarks, I think, can be borne in mind by all of us without prejudice—and I should think with some benefit. As we have no more witnesses for this afternoon, gentlemen," he continued, after a moment's pause, "I suggest that we adopt our usual course of exchanging remarks in private concerning the evidence to which we have listened. That being so, we will now excuse the attendants."

Stepping out of the lift on his way to leave the building, Mark paused to light a cigarette. Frances Moreland, who had descended with him, stretched out her fingers.

"Give me one, please," she begged.

She lit it, somewhat to his surprise, and they crossed the court-yard together. She seemed to him unnaturally tired.

"Can I take you home anywhere?" he asked. "I have a car here, if you don't mind a two-seater."

"It is very kind of you," she said doubtfully. "I was just wondering whether I wouldn't indulge in a taxi. The air of that place sometimes almost stifles me."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he insisted cheerfully. "You'll come with me."

"I live at Battersea," she told him, "Cyril Mansions. It is really quite an easy run from here, you go past the Houses of Parliament, and down on to the Embankment."

He helped her into the low, luxurious seat of his Rolls-Royce, and they started off at once. She leaned back with a little exclamation of pleasure. Presently, however, she raised herself in her place. Already the damp wind had brought a tinge of colour into her cheeks, and the lustre was returning to her eyes.

"Are you the Mr. Van Stratton one reads about in the papers?" she enquired. "Polo player and millionaire, and all that sort of thing?"

"I suppose so," he admitted. "You see, I am abandoning my evil ways, though. So far my work hasn't been very strenuous, but I am hoping soon that they will find me more to do."

She seemed a little unenthusiastic.

"Work alone with nothing outside is sheer and wretched drudgery," she said tonelessly. "Fortunately for you, you have the other things in the background. Your life of pleasure may have been wearisome at times, but at any rate it would be free from tragedy."

"Tragedy?" he repeated.

"The tragedy of loneliness," she answered.

He was for a moment made almost uncomfortable by the bitterness of her tone.

"But surely your life is in every way unique," he pointed out. "You are quoted everywhere as a prodigy. You have worked for such interesting people, and worked always so wonderfully."

"I have," she admitted, "and yet I am thirty years old, and an ordinary woman."

"You mean that you are not engaged to be married, or anything of that sort?" he asked, rather clumsily.

"That is what I do mean," she confessed. "I wish I were."

The usual banalities were impossible. He held his peace until they reached the Bridge.

"You have friends, I suppose?" he ventured. "Why not work a little less and go out a little more. One meets people that way."

"The old maid's quest!" she scoffed. "Thank you! I should hate it. I should hate the preparing myself for the sacrifice—having my hair done *à la mode*, spending more money than I can afford on clothes, and making myself agreeable to people I should probably dislike."

"Do you live alone?" he enquired.

"I do. I have a little sitting room, a smaller bedroom, a bathroom through the doorway of which you could scarcely squeeze your way, and a tiny kitchen. I had a canary once, but I forgot to feed it and it died. Occasionally some one who wishes to be kind offers me a cat or dog. I refuse because I couldn't look after them. There are my rooms, at the top of that block of flats," she told him. "I shall climb up there now, and if I have any enterprise in an hour or two I shall take a bus, come over to a restaurant, have a little dinner alone, and walk back. If the enterprise doesn't materialise I shall cook myself an egg and go to bed. To-morrow morning I shall be back at Whitehall at the usual time."

"You don't read?"

"I have had no time in my life for reading. You cannot begin to read fiction unless you develop a taste for it young. I needed my brain for other things in the days when I was more ambitious. Now there is—just nothing."

He slackened down in front of the building to which she had pointed.

"One evening," he asked, "would it amuse you to come

out and dine with me—do a play or something of that sort?"

She laughed bitterly.

"My dear man!" she exclaimed. "Think how absurd! I have one evening frock, dating from somewhere about wartime, I think. I haven't one of the proper etceteras to wear. I have never even been inside the sort of fashionable restaurant you would frequent. I can't dance, and I can't converse after the modern fashion. If you took me out, people would look at you as though you had lost your senses."

"Say, you're getting morbid!" he remonstrated, as he brought the car slowly to a standstill. "Anyway, I'd very much like to take you, if you are game to come. I'll risk the frock, and we'll go somewhere quiet."

"All right," she laughed nervously. "If you're equal to it, I am."

He sat and considered for a moment.

"I'm never quite sure of my time," he confided, "because, you see, I'm sort of a tame cat at the Embassy, and if they need me to dine or anything I have to be there. To-night I know I'm free. What about to-night?"

"It doesn't give me much time to patch up my raiment," she reflected, a little doubtfully.

"We needn't dine until late," he suggested. "We can leave the theatre for another time."

"I believe I'd rather dine and watch the people," she confessed.

"It's now a quarter past six," he announced, glancing at his watch. "I'll be round here for you at half-past eight."

"If you haven't repented," she said, with a little grimace. "I'm on the top floor. You'll see my name on the door."

"I'll come right up then," he promised, "and don't mind keeping me waiting a few minutes, if you want to. I'll call in at Mario's and order a table on my way back."

She turned away abruptly, as they came for a moment or two into the full stream of light from an electric standard. Mark was puzzled as he threw in his gear. Tears are always a puzzling thing for a man to understand.

CHAPTER XI

Mark was genuinely surprised at his companion's appearance when he led her up the stairs at Mario's to the secluded table he had taken in the balcony. Her black dress may have seen better days but it was well made and she herself, with her long, slim body, was almost graceful. She wore no jewellery and her hair was still arranged with uncompromising severity, but its quality was fine and glossy and the general effect almost distinguished.

"I hope you'll like it up here," he said, as they took their places. "I half believed what you said about your frock, and I thought you'd like to be somewhere a little out of the way. Of course, I can see now that you were making fun of me."

She looked at him gratefully.

"I love it up here better than anywhere," she assured him, looking over the balcony. "One can see everything and not be stared at. And my frock is seven years old, whether you believe it or not. The only lucky thing is that the fashion is coming back again, and I haven't had a chance to wear it very often."

"And now for dinner," he suggested, handing her a menu and taking one himself.

She laid hers down helplessly.

"I've never been in this sort of a place before," she confided. "You must do all the choosing. I like everything."

"Two cocktails, not too dry," he ordered. "A bottle of Pommery 1911, and to eat—"

He selected the courses of their dinner carefully and with frequent references to her. Then they sipped their cocktails and watched the people. There was an awkward interlude of a few moments only. It seemed difficult at first in these surroundings to attain to the intimacy of their conversation driving home to Battersea in the twilight. Yet somehow or other they drifted into it with little effort.

"You were secretary to a very great man towards the end of the war, weren't you?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Yes, I was in Paris with him. It was quite an experience for me. I had scarcely any friends there and I didn't get on very well with the people immediately round me. They all had their own friends and their own little affairs. I seemed always to be the one left out. I think I was glad to come home."

"I can't understand that at all," he told her frankly.

She smiled at him, showing very beautiful teeth, and he understood it less than ever.

"Well, you see," she explained, "it was, I think, partly my own fault. Up to the time when one is thirty, when the dread of perpetual spinsterhood becomes a real live thing, one is just a little too critical, a little severe on life. I wanted to be engaged like the others but I wanted to choose for myself—something rather better, I suppose, than my station or looks called for—and all of a sudden I woke up and I realised what had happened. I was thirty years old."

"Thirty years old is nothing for a woman," he protested.

"Thirty years old for a woman who has never even had a sweetheart," she rejoined, "is at any rate the dotage of young womanhood. The only man I could have married I should have had to buy, by working for

him as well as for myself. I see him now every two or three months."

"Come, that's something," he said. "Tell me about him."

"What there is to tell isn't exciting," she confided. "He is a clerk down in the city, about my age, better-looking than he deserves to be, considering his habits. He makes a reasonable salary and spends every penny of it upon himself. I don't suppose he has five pounds saved in the world. I used to see him a little oftener—not much. We were never really intimate. He wasn't my sort, but he was at least a man and I liked him a great deal better than I ever let him know. The last time we met he told me he was looking out for some one with money—said that he couldn't marry without it."

"Well, I don't think much of him then," Mark declared good-humouredly. "Rule him out."

"I can't," she answered, "because he is the only man I have ever seen I felt I could marry. He doesn't want me, or if he does he doesn't want me poor. So that's an end of it."

"You'll meet plenty of other men in time," he assured her.

"I never meet any," she replied. "I had the misfortune for years of my life to be utterly devoted to my work, and to forget that there was a real world moving around me. I woke up a little late. Now, during the last year, I have developed a new terror in life—the terror of loneliness."

"Well, you're not going to be lonely this evening, at any rate," he reminded her. "Here comes the caviare. Have you ever tasted it?"

"Never," she admitted. "It looks awful."

He laughed.

"Wait till I spread some on hot toast and butter for you. You'll like it all right."

Conversation became suddenly easier. With the first glass of wine they left serious topics alone. Soon the orchestra began to call to the dancers, and Frances leaned over, watching them with frankly fascinated eyes.

"Even though it is only for this once in my life," she said, as she sipped her wine, "I shall be eternally grateful to you for bringing me here. One hears about these places so often, and nobody has ever invited me to visit one."

"On my honour, I don't understand it," he declared.

"Men are always afraid of me," she sighed. "They think I am too serious for flirtation, and too unattractive to be taken seriously. And I am not at all sure that I am really a serious person at heart," she went on. "I started life that way and I expect I've grown to look forbidding. Do you think if I were to shingle my hair and use a little rouge and lip stick I would collect a few admirers?"

"You would lose one, at any rate," he rejoined. "Your lips are perfect without any of that carmine stuff, and pallor is most fashionable nowadays. It is these girls who sit up until all hours of the morning who have to paint another face every day when they get up."

"You're very encouraging," she smiled—"and I never tasted such delicious food in my life. I haven't tasted champagne either since Armistice Day."

"Have you no relatives at all?" he asked.

"An aunt in Australia. I was born in Jersey—an only child. My father and mother both died there. I came to London when I was twenty years old and went to a girls' hostel. From there I started to work. I suppose in that I was successful. Anyhow, work is the

only thing that has ever found any place in my life."

"Work has only just crept into mine," he confessed. "I've had a day and a half of it."

She laughed.

"Do you really call what you do 'work'?"

"Of course I do. I expect to be exceedingly busy tomorrow. I have to go to the Embassy before I go down to Whitehall. I hope they will let me in to the Conference room again."

"I should think they might quite safely," she observed. "You haven't followed the whole business closely enough to know what's important and what isn't. Of course when they've finished with the witnesses and try to come to a decision amongst themselves, then I suppose they'll turn us all out."

"Supposing they can't agree?"

"They must," she reminded him. "That is what makes this Conference different from any other. It was the condition America made before she joined in it. A majority vote must be accepted."

Her head was moving to the music. Her eyes drifted towards the dancers.

"I believe you want to dance," he exclaimed.

She shook her head.

"I can't," she confessed, a little bitterly.

"Have you never tried?"

"Oh, I have tried alone, and with another girl."

"Come on!" he insisted. "That's just the easiest fox trot that was ever played. Don't be nervous. Dancing is one of my tricks. I'll take you round."

She rose hesitatingly.

"I know nothing whatever about it," she warned him. "I might perhaps keep in time with the music."

"You know quite enough about it for me," he told her, a few minutes later. "Just one little break when we

started, and now I'll back us against any couple in the room. You don't need to know steps when you can move to the music like that."

They danced until the orchestra stopped, and two encores afterwards. When they abandoned the floor Frances' eyes were almost lustrous and there was a delicate pink in her cheeks. She ran on ahead up the stairs with the grace of a young girl.

"Never in my life," she confided, as she sank into her place, and watched the champagne being poured into her glass, "have I enjoyed myself so much."

"That's fine!" he exclaimed. "We'll dance again directly."

She was looking intently over the balustrade. Something of the lightness passed from her face. She leaned a little further forward.

"The young man we have been talking about is down there," she told her companion. "You won't like him. I don't know why I continue to like him myself, but still there it is!"

"The young man with the fair moustache with the elderly lady and two young women?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Terrible people; I know! They live at St. John's Wood. They have heaps of money and the father gives him orders in his business. He always thinks he'll be allowed to marry one of the daughters. I know he won't, because they are Jews and very strict."

Mark studied the young man curiously; an ordinary, rather dissipated-looking person, of apparently about thirty years of age, with a weak, good-humoured face, and a figure which had evidently suffered from lack of exercise. He was making himself very agreeable to his companions and was undoubtedly a great success with them.

"He doesn't look a bad sort," Mark pronounced. "A trifle frivolous for you, I should have thought."

She looked at him reproachfully.

"But the text of all I have been saying to you this evening," she reminded him, "has been that I am disgusted and tired of my own lack of frivolity. I'd cultivate it in a moment if I could. I'd flirt, let any reasonable man make love to me, do anything to find a little colour in life. I have ruined my best years doing correct things in a severe way."

"See here, don't overdo this," he advised seriously. "Of course, I don't believe all you say, but a girl like you is far too good to go chucking herself away upon any one."

"I don't care," she exclaimed, a little hardly. "I'm sick of my goodness, as you call it. I have tried it and I have found life thin—thin and cold. If I had had time," she went on, "to develop tastes for books, for pictures, opportunities to travel—why then everything would be different. But a working girl can't get those things into her life. Therefore she can't be independent. She must have the other things."

"Some day," he threatened, "from a vast experience of life of which you know nothing, I shall read you a severe lecture. In the meantime would you like to dance again?"

She looked at him with a queer little smile.

"I should like nothing on earth so much as to have him see me dancing with you," she confided.

He led her downstairs and they danced four times without leaving the floor. The young man watched them with stupefied eyes. Frances waved her hand to him gaily, and he had barely presence of mind enough to respond.

"My début in the gay world has been a success," she

laughed, as they climbed the stairs again. "He did very nearly once take me to the Palais de Danse at Hammersmith, but he discovered that I had never had a dancing lesson in my life, so he backed out. This is a little better than the Palais de Danse, isn't it?"

"I wonder if anything could be done about that young man?" he reflected, after a few minutes' pause. "What sort of a business is he in?"

"He's a traveller for a firm of wholesale stationers in Clerkenwell," she said. "He has been there three or four years now. Were you thinking of buying him for me?"

"Would you like me to?"

"It's a quaint idea," she ruminated. "I don't know. I'm not really quite sure. Just now, I don't think I should. In any case we're talking nonsense," she added. "Tell me, isn't that Felix Dukane down there? I thought he was never seen in a restaurant."

Mark looked downward. The already familiar thrill, half of pleasure, half of pain, suddenly gripped him. To the principal table on the other side of the room, which had been kept zealously reserved, Estelle was being ushered by Mario himself, and a little retinue of waiters. Her father, grim and unbending, took the place on one side of her. Prince Andropulo, as usual, sleek, immaculate but vaguely unpleasant, seated himself on the other. Estelle, apparently in one of her gayest moods, was laughing and talking to her companion, whilst her father studied the wine card.

"Yes," Mark replied, "that is Dukane, and a fellow called Prince Andropulo of Drome—and Miss Dukane."

"You know them?"

"Yes."

She studied his expression a little wonderingly.

"You don't mind their seeing you here with me?"

"Why, surely not!" he answered emphatically. "Was

I looking glum? I simply hate that fellow Andropulo."

"He doesn't look a pleasant person," she admitted.

Estelle looked up just then and nodded to him with a little questioning wrinkle upon her forehead. Dukane, if he recognised him, took no notice. Prince Andropulo adjusted a horn-rimmed monocle, but Mark had already looked away.

"They are a strange trio," he remarked, "especially the Dukanes. They could enter any society they wanted to here but they avoid it all the time. Felix Dukane thinks of only one thing in the world—money-making."

"He is a terrible man," Frances murmured. "The most unscrupulous person who ever breathed, they say. He has a small army of spies and where he can't get the information he wants honestly, he buys it. And look at him! What good is wealth bringing him in life?"

"He doesn't want anything," Mark answered, "except just the joy of seeing his great plans develop. It is the girl I can't understand."

She studied his momentarily gloomy countenance.

"Are you interested in her?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I am sorry," she sighed. "I don't know her, of course, but I am sorry."

"Why?" he enquired. "Don't you find her attractive?"

"Wonderfully. There is no one really like her in the room, but—"

"Well, out with it," he insisted. "You needn't mind me. I've only known her two or three days and she hasn't much use for me."

"I shouldn't think that she had any human use for any man in the world," Frances pronounced. "There are just a few people I've seen in all my life whom I should say were utterly heartless. She is one of them."

Mark drank his wine thoughtfully.

"You're not the only one who's told me that," he confessed. "But there it is. I shall have to find out. We can't alter these things, you know. I am older than you and I've had more flirtations than I'd like to own up to, but I've never felt anything before like I do now. There's more pain about it than pleasure. I suppose that's because I know instinctively, or fear instinctively, what you others tell me."

"I am sorry," she murmured.

"Meanwhile," he went on, "this young man of yours keeps on looking up here with longing eyes."

"I'm afraid he wants to come and talk to me," she confided. "He got up just now but I waved him back. Shall you mind if he does, or must you be rude to him?"

Mark laughed heartily.

"My dear," he begged, "let him come by all means. I'll even allow him a dance with you."

"But I'd rather dance with you," she confessed, "even after what you've just told me."

He avoided the suddenly softened beauty of her eyes.

"Don't disappoint him," he urged. "He is on his way here already, looking a little nervous but hopeful."

The young man presented himself. His name it appeared, was Howlett—Sidney Howlett. He accepted an introduction to Mark with bluff cordiality.

"Never was so surprised in my life as to see you two up here," he declared. "I hadn't any idea you cared for dancing, Miss Moreland?"

"I have never had much opportunity to find out whether I did or not," she replied, a little drily.

"Well, come along and let's see what we make of it," he proposed.

She glanced once more at Mark, and he waved them courteously away. For the first few moments of their departure he felt the relief of solitude. There was anger

in his heart. What was she doing there with that man again, pouring out her sweetness upon him—smiles that meant nothing, looks that meant less, still wastage, something a little lost from the great reserves! He looked frowning downwards. The party of three seemed suddenly a little bored. Estelle was keeping time to the music with her fingers. An impulse of courage seized him. He rose from his place, descended the stairs, approached the table, bowed to Estelle and turned to her father.

"May I be allowed to dance with Miss Dukane?" he enquired.

Felix Dukane scowled at him. Mark, however, held out his hand to Estelle as though taking consent for granted. She was obviously doubtful, but half rose and then glanced towards Andropulo.

"Do you mind?" she asked.

He made some inarticulate response, having just at that moment been served with a dish which demanded attention. She rose without any evidence of enthusiasm, passed in front of her father and yielded herself to Mark's clasp. They moved off to the music.

"Why on earth did you have to ask that fellow whether he minded or not?" Mark asked irritably, as soon as they were out of hearing.

She laughed.

"Well, he might have wanted to dance with me himself. After all, you're an intervener, aren't you?"

"Not half so much of an intervener as I should like to be," he declared.

"You know perfectly well that you do not deserve that I should dance with you," she said. "You do not merit anything from me at all. You say 'No' to everything I ask. I wanted really to see your invalid. You forbade it."

"Bother my invalid!" he answered. "Heavens, how divinely you dance!"

"You are not so bad yourself," she assured him. "Tell me about your companion? I am curious."

"I met her for the first time this afternoon. She has been secretary to two Prime Ministers and is, I believe, marvellously clever. She is shorthand secretary to the Conference."

"Father was right," she murmured.

"I sat by her side this afternoon," he confided, "when your father gave his evidence."

"It is, after all, a very small world," she reflected.

"It may be a very small world," he agreed, "but there are too many people in it. Where can I see you to-morrow?"

"Why to-morrow?"

"Because I want to see you every day, and to-morrow is the next."

"Is it my fancy or are you a very persistent person?" she enquired.

"I shall be persistent until you take me seriously," he warned her. "You treat me now—well, as though I were talking nonsense all the time. Some day or other you will have to make up your mind that I am in earnest."

"To what extent?"

"To the extent that you are the first woman I have ever loved in my life," he answered, stooping down to whisper in her ear.

For a moment she seemed disturbed. She snatched one glance upwards—almost a natural glance—a glance of wondering curiosity, with just a tinge of something softer in it. Then she swung away from him a little in the dancing, and laughed into his eyes.

"This is wonderful!" she exclaimed. "What is my proper answer?"

"Your proper answer is to ask me to call and settle matters with your father," he replied promptly.

"My father, as you know," she reminded him, "has awkward habits with undesirable callers. I should try correspondence."

"You permit me?" he demanded eagerly.

"Don't be absurd," she replied. "I haven't the least idea of marrying any one, and if I had I haven't made up my mind which I like best—you or Prince Andropulo, or your friend, Lord Dorchester. And, in any case, my father couldn't spare me. If you didn't dance so well, I should make you take me back now, because the Prince is scowling. As it is, however, I think we will dance the encore."

The music started again and they danced in silence for several minutes.

"Tell me what you thought of my father's evidence at the Conference this afternoon?" she enquired, a little abruptly.

"I did not listen," he answered.

She made a little grimace.

"Rather early days, isn't it, for you to adopt an official manner?" she observed. "I think you are the most obstinate young man I ever met."

"I am the most faithful," he assured her.

"A thoroughly Anglo-Saxon quality. I am not sure, however, that fidelity ranks amongst the virtues in France."

"Listen," he pleaded. "We have wasted our time talking nonsense. The music is coming to an end. Can I see you to-morrow, and where, and when? And can I really write to your father and say that I want to marry you?"

"You are ridiculous!" she explained. "How do I know whether I can see you to-morrow or not? I have no idea

what I am doing. Now please go away nicely and thank me for my dance."

He conducted her to her table and bade her a formal farewell. She laughed up in his face at his obvious discomfiture.

"It is very hard to believe," she whispered, "that you have ever lived in Paris. You seem to understand Frenchwomen so little."

CHAPTER XII

Frances was already in her seat when he regained his table. Mr. Sidney Howlett had taken his departure.

"Well?" he enquired, as he seated himself and poured out some wine. "How did it go?"

"Moderately," she confessed. "He didn't dance nearly as well as you, and he was desperately inquisitive. What does it matter to any one with whom I come here or why you should have asked me?"

"He isn't jealous, by any chance, is he?" Mark enquired.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"He is so thoroughly masculine," she answered. "What he could have had he never valued until he sees some one else paying some slight attention to it. Then he begins to think. When he discovered that you were the great Mr. Van Stratton, millionaire, polo player, diplomat now—I didn't tell him for how long—he was terribly impressed. I can see him asking himself: if she is attractive enough for him to bring out to a place like this, why haven't I brought her? He is just beginning to wonder whether he's missed something."

"Your analysis of the young man's character," he remarked, "may be true, but it is scarcely flattering."

"I know him," she sighed. "He has some good points. I have, as I told you, a kindly feeling for him, but he will never be anything but what he is. No one could improve him. No one could move him out of his rut. If I marry him he will come home late at least three nights

in the week, he will seldom take me out, he will expect good food, he will go to a football match on Saturday afternoons, and if he takes me for a walk some time on Sunday he will spend the rest of the day either playing golf on the town course, or billiards in a public house. If we have children he will consider them a nuisance and he will stay away from home a little more often. If he has money enough he will get drunk now and then. He will consider that he has performed the whole duty of life if he snatches a kiss in the passage before he rushes off to the city in the morning. So many men salve their consciences with that kiss."

"You're not painting a very alluring prospect of domestic happiness," Mark observed. "If this is how you really feel, I don't think I should rush into it."

"It is better than loneliness," she declared. "If there was anything else offered, perhaps I should prefer it—but it is the loneliness, the icy fingers on my heart that I fear. To escape from that I would do anything."

"Loneliness is a purely relative phrase," he sighed. "One can be lonely in the midst of everything that is wonderful in life, for the sake of one person. One can be mad enough, foolish enough," he went on, "to make that one person the whole guardian of one's happiness. It is foolish, but we others can do that in the midst of a full life, and also find loneliness."

The people were thinning out. Estelle, with her two companions, had departed, without an upward glance. Mark paid his bill.

"Your young man," he remarked, "looks up here rather often."

She nodded.

"I know. He wants to take me home."

"I'll let him, and lend you the car, if you like," he suggested. "I can easily get a taxi."

She laid her hand upon his; the first time either of them had indulged in the slightest familiarity.

"Please don't suggest anything of the sort," she begged. "You have given me the most wonderful evening of my life, but you would spoil it if you sent me home with anybody else."

They descended the stairs and took their places in his limousine, which rolled up almost at once. A slight rain was falling and the streets were practically deserted.

"I am the most inexperienced person in the world," she confessed. "A man once tried to hold my hand in a taxi in Paris, and I was angry. Now please I want you to hold my hand. Do you mind?"

She gave it to him and leaned back with a little sigh of content, her head very near his shoulder.

"It has been like a beautiful dream," she told him. "I don't know why you asked me to come. I can't imagine what made you. Was it just sheer kindness?"

"What an idea!" he remonstrated. "It was more like selfishness. I had a free evening and I felt sure we should enjoy being together. You will come again?"

"As often as you ask me."

They left the Embankment and crossed the bridge. She drew a little closer to him.

"This is where I begin to get lonely," she confided. "Do you see how tall and grey and sombre all the buildings seem here, and the trees—how comfortless and how they drip? Look, too, not a soul in sight! People hide around here, I think. I have walked up my stairs at night a dozen times and never seen a soul."

"Perhaps this loneliness," he prophesied, "will not last so very long now. I think you will find that Mr. Sidney Howlett will be round to see you very soon."

"Perhaps so," she answered listlessly. "I am not sure whether I ever want to see him again."

They drew up at the entrance to her flats. She stepped down on the pavement in front of him and moved swiftly to the door. He followed, after a momentary hesitation.

"What about saying good night to your host," he suggested.

"You must come up the stairs with me," she insisted. "I do it so many times alone, and half afraid, that to-night I will be escorted. I will go up comfortably and safely and feeling warm inside. Do you mind?"

"Mind? Why should I?" he answered.

She passed her arm lightly through his. As they reached the fifth floor she pointed to a little card and handed him a key.

"That is my room," she said. "Open the door, please."

He obeyed, acquiescent but vaguely uneasy. Inside everything was a model of neatness and discomfort. A little fire, however, was burning in the grate.

"You see," she sighed, "it is just as I told you, isn't it? Listen!"

There was no sound to be heard. Even the faint roar of distant traffic seemed like an undernote of silence. He stood there with his hat in his hand, his muffler still round his neck, his coat buttoned up. Her hand suddenly gripped his.

"On Armistice Day," she confided, "two men kissed me. They were both drunk. In Paris, later, a man tried to and I was angry. Once, since then, Sidney Howlett kissed me downstairs when he said good night to me. A dreary record, isn't it?"

He held her fingers firmly and smiled down at her.

"If this had been three days ago," he told her, "I know very well how wonderful it would have been to have changed that. But you realise what has come to me. I told you. I wouldn't hurt you by offering what you

would know belongs to some one else in my thoughts even if it never reaches her."

She was herself again. With a curious and vigorous effort of will she passed her arm through his and led him lightly to the door.

"You are the dearest person," she declared. "I shall live until you take me out again, and to-morrow I shall help you if you need help. Do you mind turning out the light on the bottom floor there?"

She stood in the open doorway so that he could see his way down the first flight. He looked back and waved his hand. The memory of her farewell smile, as she stepped back, brave and cheerful though it was, filled him with an indefinable sense of reproach.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER XIII

Raoul de Fontanay studied his two companions thoughtfully as the three men seated themselves at their accustomed table in the restaurant of the Ritz Hotel. Mark Van Stratton was unusually silent and absorbed; Dorchester almost morose.

"If I were to be born again," De Fontanay declared, with some asperity, "I would be born a Mohammedan. Women occupy too large a share of our thoughts and interests in the Christian countries. Man's *métier*, after all, is accomplishment. The playthings of the world should be kept in their places."

"This from a Frenchman!" Dorchester sighed. "An adorer of the sex!"

"In their place, yes," was the prompt rejoinder. "I have told you many times what my idea of that place is. Yet you two, whom I once fancied my disciples, have forgotten."

"I have come to the conclusion," Mark pronounced, "that the average Frenchman has no sentiment."

"Ah!" De Fontanay murmured.

"He is a hunter of women," Mark continued, "a reveller in their caresses and embraces, but it is the sex which appeals to him, not the individual."

"I am inclined to agree with you," Dorchester declared. "He misses the great pleasures, but he saves himself the pain."

"You two," De Fontanay pronounced deliberately—"you are the worst, of course, Mark—are like a couple

of lovelorn lunatics. You both have one of these absurd fancies for the same woman—a fancy which you dignify by the name of 'love', but which, as neither of you know anything about her, is a sort of conglomeration of passion and sentiment, wholly created by your imaginations. Love, if it exists at all, is of slower growth. Henri," he added, turning round to a hovering *maître d'hôtel*, "the caviare is not so small as last week. How comes that?"

"The perfect caviare," Henri confessed, "is hard now to find. One does one's best."

"Perfect! Who expects perfection?" the Marquis complained. "Nothing that is left in the world these days is more than a substitute for the things which went before. Let us, however, cease being cynical. Mark, my congratulations! You are an instance of how malleable we all really are. A fortnight ago you had the appearance of a pleasure-loving young athlete, *et voilà tout!* To-day you have cultivated the air and manners of a diplomat."

"That's right! Chaff away!" Mark grumbled. "I wish I had been in it from the first."

"Find it interesting down at Whitehall?" Dorchester enquired.

"Interesting enough," Mark admitted, "but they are turning us all out in a day or two. I'd like to be there when the evidence is discussed and the decision arrived at."

"That decision may present difficulties," De Fontanay observed, a little coldly.

"It will be difficult," Dorchester agreed, "simply because those who sit round the table look at the matter with different eyes—have, indeed, different interests. A decision will be arrived at because of the majority vote, but it will never be an amicable one. How could it be?

Between your country, for instance, Raoul, and Germany there is a racial and ineradicable hatred. Between the Anglo-Saxons—the Americans and the English—and the Germans, there is none of that feeling. They come from something like the same stock. Notwithstanding the terrible wave of disgust with Germany which the war created, the years must bring to us a kindlier feeling towards her. Your people know that, and you dread it. That is why you make this question of reparations so difficult."

"Money is not everything in the world," De Fontanay pronounced. "Our first duty to our country is safety."

"But you seek it in the narrowest way," Dorchester ventured. "You seek always to destroy. The more you paralyse German industries and retard her recuperation, the worse for us and really for yourselves. You attack the material only. Her soul you can never touch."

De Fontanay shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"With others," he confided, "I should discuss this matter more bitterly. With you I will only say that I recognise your point of view. I admit the great trouble. It is almost impossible to reduce the interests of France, England and America to the same denomination. However, let us leave these controversial matters alone for a little time. To-day," he added, "I have ordered a *châteaubriand*. A *châteaubriand* requires digestion. We must avoid subjects likely to stir the feelings or evolve platitudes. Digestion must be our aim. Let us speak, therefore, of the subject which appears to interest you two most. Tell me exactly what it is about Estelle Dukane which so much attracts you?"

Mark's seat commanded the entrance to the restaurant. He suddenly sat upright. His fingers touched the table.

"Herself!" he exclaimed.

She came swinging down the room, Prince Andropulo in the rear, an obsequious *maître d'hôtel* in advance. She was wearing a rose-coloured costume trimmed with grey fur and she walked with the spring of perfect health; the movement of one happy to be alive. Her eyes looked graciously on every side, her lips were ready to smile. Her way led her past the table where the three men sat, and she stopped at once, regardless of her companion.

"You three nice people!" she exclaimed, as they rose to their feet. "How faithful you are to one another. You lunch together here always?"

"At regular intervals," De Fontanay told her. "It has been a custom of ours since the war."

"What a friendship!" she murmured. "And you," she added, smiling up at Mark, "how goes the new career? All your time is now occupied? Yes? You have no time even to think of your old friends, or your new ones?"

"My career has not so far made very strenuous demands upon me," Mark replied, a little taken aback.

"My father has gone to Paris this morning," she went on. "I am staying with Prince Andropulo's mother at Claridge's. If you have time, come in and see me, Mr. Van Stratton—and you too, Lord Dorchester. The Marquis knows he is always welcome at any time."

"When may I come?" Mark asked, with eager directness.

"Well, I won't promise you tea because I hate it," she declared. "The hour before I change—say from six to seven—finds me always at home and always ready to be entertained. Au revoir, all of you."

She passed on and they resumed their seats. Mark, notwithstanding his elation, scowled as he watched the Prince holding her chair.

"Curse that fellow!" he exclaimed. "What on earth does she want to come out with him for?"

"You will never," De Fontanay pronounced, "be able to judge Mademoiselle Dukane by ordinary standards. She is a Parisienne to the finger tips and to be a Parisienne means that she is going to do just what she chooses, somehow or other. *Par exemple,* a married Frenchwoman who has made up her mind to deceive her husband does so, but if she has a kind heart she shows it by being even more amiable to him, and by taking extra pains that he never discovers her infidelity."

"These are interesting generalities," Dorchester observed, "but I agree with Mark. I can't see what pleasure she finds in going about with a fellow like that."

"You ignore one of the guiding principles of her life," De Fontanay rejoined. "They say that she is her father's associate, almost his partner, in many of his great enterprises. You may be very sure that they want something from Prince Andropulo. I suppose he will reign some day and there is a great deal of undeveloped wealth in his country. By the bye, Mark, were you in the Conference room when Dukane gave his evidence?"

Mark nodded.

"I was there," he admitted briefly.

De Fontanay drummed thoughtfully with his fingers upon the table for a moment.

"What a confiding race these British are," he observed. "Here you have only been attached to the Conference for a matter of hours and you are permitted to hear a piece of very important evidence. There is a young woman there all the time too, is there not?"

"Sure," Mark assented, "but she's a very experienced person."

"Every one knows Miss Frances Moreland," Dorchester observed. "She has been private secretary to two Cabinet Ministers and did wonderful work at the Peace Conference."

"As a matter of fact," Mark went on, "how could you tempt a woman like that? She must earn an excellent salary, and she obviously has no frivolous tastes. Supposing, for instance, that the German Secret Service, whom you, Raoul, are watching all the time, wanted to know the conclusions of the Conference a little beforehand—I can quite understand that it would be a great advantage—what sort of a bribe could they offer a person in that position? They might as well approach one of your principals."

"Theoretically I agree," De Fontanay remarked dubiously. "And yet, when one gets to the inner shades of diplomacy, I have never felt the same confidence when the woman comes in. I must confess I was surprised when I heard that she was preparing a *précis* of the whole evidence and the comments thereon for the Prime Minister. I should have thought that one of the official secretaries from the Foreign Office would have done that."

"They are not nearly so quick or so accurate," Dorchester asserted. "I know that when she was private secretary to Johnson-Mair, he declared that in four years she had never made a mistake of any sort—taken down a wrong word or left one out. Her shorthand is simply magic. No, I should say that she was the woman for the job. What do you think, Mark?"

Mark had been silent for a moment or two. He answered now almost with reluctance.

"I cannot imagine any one seriously doubting Miss Moreland's honesty," he said, "any more than they would her capacity. Personally, too, I have the greatest admiration and respect for her. I can't help feeling, however, that a document of such importance should be drafted by a permanent official. It seems scarcely fair to the girl herself to place such a tremendous responsibility upon her. Supposing anything did leak out before

the time, and as we all know there have been leakages already, she would naturally come under suspicion."

De Fontanay sipped his wine.

"The subject interests me," he remarked, "because I happen to know that, besides an agent of the German Secret Service, there are several other bidders for early information. However, enough of politics. Mark—to America! Dorchester—to England!"

"To France!" they both reciprocated.

Their usual toasts were drunk and presently they rose from the table. Estelle, looking thoroughly bored with her companion, was leaning back in her chair. She waved her hand to them gaily and her lips moved as though to remind Mark of the evening. He made his way presently back to Whitehall, conscious of a sudden relief from the depression of the last few days. The disconcerting things upon which his mind had been dwelling with dismay had suddenly become trifles.

CHAPTER XIV

Mark, ushered upon his arrival into the drawing-room of an imposing suite upon the first floor of Claridge's Hotel, was received at once by Estelle, who introduced him to an elderly and even fatter replica of Prince Andropulo.

"Let me present Mr. Van Stratton—Her Majesty, the Dowager Queen of Drome. I know you don't care about tea, Mr. Van Stratton. I wonder whether you would care to dance for half an hour?"

"There is nothing in the world I should like better," he agreed, after he had raised to his lips the pudgy fingers extended to him by Andropulo's mother.

"We will go downstairs at once, then," she suggested. "From here the music sounds entrancing."

Estelle laid her fingers upon his arm as they descended the stairs a note of familiarity which brought him a curious thrill.

"You see Madame does not quite understand the Bohemian life which father and I have chosen to lead," she explained. "I suppose we could have all the friends we like. We prefer none. It seems it is not *convenable* for me to receive you in my suite, and as the dear old lady thinks that some day I will marry her son she has planted herself there. I thought you would prefer to dance."

"I would indeed," he assured her. "And perhaps we might find a corner and talk for a few minutes now and then."

"What do you want to talk to me about?" she asked.

"For one thing I should like to tell you just what I

think of you," he answered, as he rang the bell for the lift.

"And then?"

"I would like you to tell me just what you think of me."

She laughed softly.

"You are very frank," she said.

"A national characteristic," he confided, lowering his voice and looking around. "You know quite well that I want you to marry me."

"But I do not want to marry anybody," she exclaimed.

"You must some day," he persisted.

She sighed.

"I suppose so. Tell me why you want to marry me? Just because I am pretty? That is not much, you know. There are beautiful girls in London—any quantity of them. Mine is not a wonderful type."

"It is just because you are yourself," he confessed. "You are the most attractive thing I ever saw. You can look things out of your eyes which would turn any man's head. Sometimes I wish you wouldn't do it."

She laughed.

"But then you must remember I am French. I know that I flirt. If I were engaged to you, you would probably be jealous."

"In time," he assured her, "you would care for me so much that you wouldn't look at these other men."

"Then life would be very dull," she complained. "Again I must remind you that Frenchwomen are not like that. We must flirt after marriage just as much as before—perhaps a little more. It is the only thing which keeps us young."

"I fancy there are a few other things in life I could give you to think about," he declared.

She made an entrancing little grimace.

"I think," she told him, "that the lift is here."

"Of course," Estelle admitted, half an hour later, "it would be a great thing to have one's husband dance as wonderfully as you."

"It would be a marvellous thing," he rejoined, "to own any one who feels as you do in one's arms."

"I suppose I shall have to think about it," she sighed, "some day. But then you know there's Lord Dorchester. I couldn't bear to make him unhappy."

"You could flirt with him to a modified extent after we were married," Mark suggested.

"Do you suppose," she asked indignantly, "that any man would be satisfied to flirt with me to a modified extent?"

"Perhaps not. But if you were married to me no one would do more."

There was a pause in the music. They seated themselves in two convenient chairs.

"Now that we have found a quiet little corner," she said, "let us talk for a moment. Do you know that you could really please and help me very much."

"Whatever you want in this world," he began breathlessly,—

"You must not be so precipitate," she interrupted. "You do not quite understand yet. I may not be able to make you understand at all. But you could help and in a way which would do no one any harm."

He looked at her anxiously. A premonition of what was coming dawned upon him.

"You are now one of the regular secretaries at the Conference," she began.

"I am," he admitted.

"Now believe me," she went on, resting her fingers for a moment upon his hand, "I would not ask you to do

anything which really mattered. I would not ask you, for instance, to repeat to me anything spoken by any of the witnesses whom you have heard examined. At the same time, it is of the greatest possible moment to us to know what the attitude of the Conference is towards the evidence which has been given. In a general way, I mean—the gossip of the place. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Well," she continued, "the evidence is now closed, is it not? The sifting of it began this afternoon. By to-morrow you will begin to realise how things are looking. I, too, should like to know how things are looking."

He sat quite still. Her hands had fallen once more upon his. He looked over the heads of the people into the dancing room.

"I should like to know that day by day," she continued. "Just in the way of a pleasant, confidential little conversation. It would do no one any harm. Finally, the decision will be arrived at. There will be no secrecy about it. It will be published in all the newspapers. The actual amount which the Conference has decided that Germany must pay or no longer exist as one of the nations will be announced. I want to know that amount forty-eight hours before the rest of the world."

"Miss Dukane," he said, driven at last to definite speech, "anything in the world I own for which you ask me I'd give you gladly, but I don't think you ought to ask this."

Her forehead was wrinkled. She had an air of almost pathetic lack of understanding.

"Whom should I ask, then, if not the man who keeps on telling me that he cares? Do not look so tragic, my dear friend. I am not asking you for anything that really matters. I am asking only to know a little in

advance what in due course will be known all over the world."

Mark seemed suddenly to feel older; a little tired with the world which a few minutes before had seemed so wonderful. So this was the reason of her kindness! He was to be made use of, cajoled into dishonour. He ventured to look at her. What he saw surprised him. He had expected that slight tightening of the lips, the hardness which sometimes came into her eyes. Nothing of the sort was apparent. Her smile was inviting, almost affectionate, her expression tender, her eyes sweet.

"You must see," he protested a little hoarsely, "that even if I were in a position to know these things I could not disclose them."

"You dear boy, why not?" she asked, still without resentment, without a trace of anger. "I have heard of men doing all sorts of things to prove that they really cared. This is not so hard. It would not hurt a soul. In fact, it would do good."

"I couldn't do it," he repeated; this time firmly enough.

For a moment there was silence. He did not dare to look at her. He felt the change without seeking for its signs. Presently she rose to her feet.

"Let us dance," she invited.

They made their way back to the room and danced, still in absolute silence. Mark was acutely conscious of her altered attitude, of an entire departure of the ecstasy of the earlier part of the afternoon. Her eyes no longer met his as he looked down, her lips no longer broke into a happy little smile at the rhythm of the movement. She glanced around all the time as though searching for interest or amusement elsewhere. Her feet followed his unconsciously. She expressed no pleasure when they paused for the encore. She danced as one

dances from a sense of duty. Afterwards, when he led the way mechanically back to the lounge, she chose a more public seat.

"I daresay you would like to go presently," she remarked, glancing at the clock. "You probably are dining somewhere, and so am I."

"Are you dining with that fellow Andropulo?" he demanded.

"Why not?" she rejoined. "He deserves that I should. There is nothing in the world he would not do if I would promise him what I nearly promised you. Besides, Prince Andropulo is my friend."

"I am sorry to hear it," he declared.

"Really, you are impossible," she complained. "It is I who should be bad-tempered, and not you."

"Because I refuse to do a thing no honourable man would think of doing?"

"Oh, la, la!" she exclaimed. "Don't be so stiff and wooden. Every action in the world becomes different according to circumstances. You simply do not understand. The truth is that you do not care enough. Why should you? You have not known me very long. I am not a very wonderful person, after all."

"Perhaps you are not," he agreed a little hardly. "I don't think at this moment that you are worth everything I feel for you, and yet I know I couldn't care as I do, in the way I do, if there wasn't something there I haven't got at yet. If I could make you care you'd understand, but I should never make you care by doing such a thing as you've asked me this afternoon—even if you gave me the husks of your gratitude."

She shook her head.

"There is no mystery about me," she said coldly. "I am just a very natural person, a little spoilt, perhaps, who likes her own way and likes the people who give it to

her. I am not so angry with you as you think, Mr. Mark Van Stratton. I am just sorry for your limitations. I should like to see in you a man who, when he loves or says he loves, gives all. Perhaps you might find that something in me which you say is there, and which I do not know of. If you found it, it would be yours."

Dorchester, arrived breathless from the House of Commons, lingered upon the threshold for a moment, and, seeing them, dropped his eyeglass and approached. Estelle welcomed him gaily.

"Come," he declared, "you've been monopolising Miss Dukane long enough, Mark. You won't mind my having a dance?"

Mark rose to his feet, assenting dumbly. Estelle nodded her farewell.

"It will have to be the last one," she confided, "so I will say good night. I have to change early."

She held out her arms to her partner and they moved off. Mark, remaining where he was for a few moments, watched them dance, watched her laughing up into her partner's face, her whole attention apparently riveted upon him, watched him lean down to respond—the whole pantomime of dancing between intimates. Then he turned around, took his hat and coat from the attendant and left.

CHAPTER XV

An elderly manservant, in worn dark plum-coloured livery, opened the door of the little suite in Arlington Street in response to Mark's somewhat impatient ring, a few minutes later. The faint querulousness of his expression disappeared as soon as he recognised the visitor.

"Monsieur will be pleased to enter," he begged. "Monsieur le Marquis takes his bath—an affair now of a few moments only."

Mark passed through the door, which the man held open, into a small but comfortable sitting room, furnished with unerring taste but with scant indications of luxury. Beyond were folding doors which concealed the sleeping apartment and bathroom. He threw himself into an easy-chair, refused a cigarette, and lounged there with his hands in his pockets. In a few minutes, De Fontanay, wrapped in a dressing gown, made his appearance. The two men exchanged the usual laconic greetings of old friends.

"Too early for a cocktail," De Fontanay observed, drawing up a chair. "What about a whisky and soda?"

"I don't want anything to drink," Mark replied. "I notice, Raoul, that whenever we speak of Estelle Dukane you seem to do so with a certain reserve. I've come to ask you what is your honest opinion of her?"

De Fontanay lit a cigarette.

"My young friend," he confided, "I never have an honest opinion about a woman. What do you want me to tell you about her that you haven't found out for yourself?"

"I want to know whether I was wrong—whether I am wrong—about her now," Mark said dejectedly.

"Treating you badly, eh?"

"Rottenly."

De Fontanay flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"It is the French side of her which you do not understand," he explained. "But then, it always comes back to the eternal doctrine which I am continually preaching to you and Dorchester. You take your women too seriously. You expect too much of them. You bore them with your expectations. The true Frenchwoman wants to be the partner of your pleasures, not the partner of your life. Why, you behave as though you might even expect her to take breakfast with you."

"These, after all, are merely generalities," Mark complained, a little bitterly. "What I want to find out is whether Estelle Dukane is a typical Frenchwoman, possessing all these failings which you point out so eloquently, or whether she is in any way the woman I believed her to be."

"I will compose myself to be serious," his friend promised. "I will tell you this—that I really do not know. She has at times puzzled me. I will recount to you the one thing which leads me to believe that there may be hope for you."

"Go ahead," Mark begged.

"She was in Florence last spring with her father, and I came across them once or twice there. I remember one morning, I had wandered into the Uffizzi Gallery a little earlier than the crowd, and I found her seated there. She did not see me, and I kept purposely out of sight, because psychologically I was a little interested. She was studying one of the 'Madonnas'—I think it was the most motherly of all of them—the Raphael 'Mother and Child.' I watched her for a minute or two from

the distance and I saw something in her eyes which I have never seen since and which I imagine she chooses to keep concealed. Still it was there because I saw it. Since then I have always half believed that she is not exactly the—you will forgive me—the heartless little *mondaine* she so often appears."

"If I hadn't believed something of the sort," Mark declared earnestly, "I could never have cared for her as I do. For some reason or other, though, she shows me nothing except either the most frivolous side of herself or the most selfish."

"The caprice of her sex," De Fontanay observed. "As you have doubtless discovered, there is nothing bores a woman so much as too many evidences of affection from the man whom she is only just beginning to like. The way to win the heart of a Frenchwoman is to keep her amused. There are more hearts won in Paris with witty speeches than tender ones."

"I suppose," Mark said gloomily, "you think you know the devil of a lot about women, Raoul?"

"The time has evidently arrived," his friend rejoined, "when you need the soothing influence of a cocktail. I have given you the encouragement you came to get—more than you had hoped for, I should imagine. I should think it quite probable, from what I know of Estelle Dukane, that there is some part of herself which she keeps entirely in the background, but if you want my advice don't go about your love-making in such deadly earnest. You wouldn't do yourself any harm if you dropped it altogether for a week."

There was a pleasant sound of tinkling ice in the background and presently the elderly manservant made his appearance through the folding doors, carrying the two cocktails on an old-fashioned tray. He served them with an air reminiscent of the Faubourg, left the shaker upon

the table and took his leave. De Fontanay lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair.

"How is your job going, Mark?" he asked.

"All right, so far. My work's not been very difficult."

"I suppose you know why you got it?"

"Well, in the first place because Dimsdale was ill and Rawlinson got the influenza."

De Fontanay shook his head.

"Dimsdale," he confided, "will never return to the Embassy. His career is ended."

"What the mischief do you mean?" Mark demanded.

"I mean," De Fontanay continued, "that ever since the Conference opened its sessions there has been a leakage in information. Dimsdale came under suspicion and in the end was detected. One of my own men was the first to find out what was happening. Then there was Count Matorni. You heard of him, of course. He blew out his brains to escape arrest."

"I am sorry," Mark exclaimed. "I never knew Matorni, but I always thought Dimsdale a very decent sort."

"So he was in the beginning," De Fontanay agreed. "He got into the wrong set, though, and London is no place for a poor man. Your Chief treated him very leniently, but there is a rumour that he threw himself from the steamer on the way home."

Mark was beginning for a moment to forget his own trouble. The news about Dimsdale had affected him immensely.

"After all," he reflected, "I can't quite see why this information as to the proceedings of the Conference up to the present is worth so much. It will all be made public sooner or later."

De Fontanay smiled.

"Consider," he pointed out. "Here is Felix Dukane, a man who commands practically a secret service of his

own, hovering in the background, preparing to embark upon the greatest financial venture of his life, eager all the time for news as to the way the deliberations are running, what the fixed amount will be, whether it will be such a sum as Germany can possibly settle down to pay, and whether, therefore, the loan will be needed. Then there are those German millionaires, Dukane's friends, who, with the most devilish subtlety, got so much of their money across to the States. Don't you think that they are anxiously waiting every moment to know whether their peccadilloes have been discovered, whether there is going to be any attempt to force them to disgorge? There are plenty of other rumours, of course. I am told that there is a man in this country at the present moment who did great work in the German Secret Service during the war, who has in his possession absolute evidence as to the future plans of Germany and the most damning proof of her bellicose intentions. That is the man I want to get hold of, but for the present he seems to have disappeared. The man who was responsible for Dimsdale's downfall, however—Felix Dukane—is the most sinister figure of the lot. He is on the eve of the greatest enterprise of his life, and—"

De Fontanay broke off in his sentence and listened. The outer door of his little apartment had been suddenly opened and closed. There was a knocking at the inner door; not an ordinary, tentative knock of invitation, but a succession of blows, dealt on the panels as though in desperation. De Fontanay sprang to his feet, anticipating Gaston, the manservant's slower progress, and threw open the door. Estelle stepped lightly across the threshold, the shadow of her old maddening smile upon her lips as she looked up at De Fontanay.

"Close the door quickly, please," she begged. "There are some inquisitive people about."

CHAPTER XVI

It seemed to Mark, in those few seconds of agonised astonishment, as though every muscle in his body went hard and tense. His heart was pounding against his ribs. He saw the faces of the two—Estelle's and his friend's—through a red mist. Speech of any sort was impossible. Estelle, quitting the proximity of the door, suddenly recognised his presence, recognised also at the same moment the blaze of passion in his clear eyes and what it portended.

"Incorrigible!" she exclaimed.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I might tell you to mind your own business," she answered coldly. "As a matter of fact, you will soon know. Can you fight, you two?"

"With one another?" Mark asked, looking across at his friend.

"Idiot!" she scoffed. "To protect me."

"What from?"

"Listen. You will probably find out," she replied.

There was the sound of a heavy fall in the room above, something which might have been a muffled revolver shot. De Fontanay opened the drawer of his bureau, took out an automatic pistol and a box of cartridges. He picked up another which he offered to Mark.

"Will you have a gun, my young friend," he asked "or will you rely upon your Herculean strength?"

"If there's any fighting to be done, I'll fight with my

fists," Mark replied. "But what does it all mean? Whom is there to fight?"

Estelle took no notice of him. She was listening intently to the sounds of disturbance above. De Fontanay turned to her.

"Will you pardon me, Mademoiselle, if I enquire what you are doing in this building at all?"

"I will tell you—certainly. I received a telegram which was waiting for me in my room when I had finished dancing this afternoon. It was from my father in Paris. He told me to call at Number 8 flat in these mansions at half-past six to-night with a certain sum of money, and to receive from a man who was passing by the name of Johnson a roll of papers."

She was distracted by a renewal of the sounds above. They all listened. Heavy furniture was being dragged about. There were footsteps passing backwards and forwards in every direction; an angry voice, another in pain.

"Would you," De Fontanay begged, "kindly warn us what we have to expect?"

"I had only just time," Estelle went on, "to write out a cheque for the money, jump into a taxi and drive here. I noticed when I entered that there was a man loitering on the pavement, watching, and another studying the names on the board below whose face I did not like. However, I was here, so I went up. The man Johnson was expecting me. There were two others with him. Johnson was a big, fat man, a foreigner of some sort. It was he who talked with me; another listened at the door. I handed him the cheque. He was like a madman. It was notes he wanted—notes! Of what use was a cheque? I explained that I had only just received the telegram. He and the third man talked for a time. At last they seemed to agree. They handed me some papers and I

gave them the cheque. Just as I was leaving, the bell of the flat rang. All three men were terrified. They were forced to open the door, however, for the bell kept on ringing. Two men entered and the moment Johnson caught sight of the foremost there was a panic. He snatched up a gun but the other two pulled it away from him. Whilst they were all shouting, I slipped round them, slammed the door and ran downstairs. That is exactly what happened."

"You did me the honour," De Fontanay remarked, "to remember my poor abode."

She nodded.

"Considering that I saw the name on the door as I passed up the stairs, it is not wonderful."

The tumult in the room above had ceased. They heard a door open and close, then the sound of descending footsteps. There was a brief conversation with some one on the stairs, after which the bell rang. De Fontanay held up his hand. No one moved. Along the little outside passage Gaston passed to answer the summons. They heard a peremptory voice at the door, a faint protest from Gaston. Without waiting to be announced two men in plain clothes but with an undoubtedly official appearance, entered. The foremost of them, a tall, broad-set man, dressed in a dark blue serge suit, thick black overcoat and a bowler hat, stood for a moment surveying the company, his eyes travelling swiftly from one to the other, taking in apparently every detail of the room. He waved his hand a little contemptuously at De Fontanay's revolver.

"You can put that away," he directed. "We are not bandits."

De Fontanay made no movement.

"It is interesting to know what you are not," he observed, "but since you force your way into my private

apartments it would perhaps be still more interesting to know what you are."

"I am Inspector Grierson of Scotland Yard," was the laconic reply. "I am acting in support of my companion who belongs to a kindred service."

"And your business here?"

"Is with that young lady," the inspector answered, indicating Estelle.

De Fontanay unloaded his pistol and thrust it back into the drawer.

"Proceed," he invited.

The inspector stepped into the background. His companion, a slim, well-dressed man, evidently occupying a different station in life, took a step forward.

"Miss Dukane, I believe," he said in a cultivated voice.

"That is my name," Estelle admitted.

"You visited the flat above this evening with a view to obtaining possession of some documents for which you paid the sum of five thousand pounds. Your cheque will not be cashed. I must ask you for the return of the documents."

"I do not understand you," she declared, frowning. "If I choose to pay for something which Mr. Johnson has and which he sells me, what business is it of any one else's?"

"Miss Dukane," the other replied patiently, "it is a great deal the business of other people, because the document you were purchasing from Mr. Johnson contains stolen information of the proceedings at Whitehall which the Government of this country does not propose to allow in circulation."

"If you believe that I have any such papers," Estelle protested, "I can assure you that you are mistaken."

"That is not our conviction," was the prompt rejoinder. "You paid over the cheque. It is only fair to as-

sume that you received the *quid pro quo*. It would perhaps save time if I were to assure you that my orders are entirely definite. I must take those papers from whoever has them, at any cost.

"It is necessary that you find the person first," Estelle exclaimed defiantly.

"That, I venture to think, is already accomplished. You have had no opportunity of disposing of them since you left the flat above, as you were watched by the man who was posted on the stairs to prevent any one's escape. Furthermore, as you would not have been allowed to leave the building and we have searched the whole flat above and satisfied ourselves that the papers are not there, we are forced to the conclusion that in return for your cheque for five thousand pounds they are now in your possession."

"I know nothing of them," she asserted.

"If you persist in that attitude," her interlocutor decided, "we have no alternative but to search you."

"That is what you would not dare to do," she retorted indignantly. "If either of you venture to offer me such an insult, you will regret it for the rest of your lives. My father—"

"Miss Dukane," the other interrupted, "we know very well that your father is a man of great influence. The law, however, has its necessities. We do not propose, either I or the inspector here, to touch you. You will simply remain where you are whilst the inspector telephones to Scotland Yard for a woman searcher."

She glared at him for a moment without speech. Once more Mark, watching her closely, wondered at those suddenly apparent lines about her mouth. She turned to De Fontanay.

"Marquis," she appealed, "can they do this?"

He extended his hands regretfully.

"I fear so, Mademoiselle," he admitted. "It is the fortune of war."

Mark took a step forward. He looked at the two men as though measuring his strength against theirs.

"If you will say what you wish," he began, his eyes fixed upon Estelle's—

"Do not be absurd, my friend," De Fontanay intervened. "In no reasonable country does any one resist the law. To do so can only result in discomfiture."

Mark's gaze remained fixed upon the girl. She shrugged her shoulders. Then, with a little gesture of anger, she stood away from the table against which she had been leaning, thrust her hand into the bosom of her gown, and drew out a thin roll of papers.

"You are disgusting!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears, and throwing the papers upon the floor.

The man who had been questioning her stepped forward. He picked up the papers and, with an unexpected monocle, which he withdrew from his waistcoat pocket, glanced through them. Apparently satisfied, he folded them up and placed them in an inside pocket of his coat.

"Miss Dukane," he said, "the papers appear to be those of which we are in search. We have nothing more to say to you on this occasion. It is only right to warn you, however, that trafficking in stolen information of this description is a criminal offence. What steps, if any, the authorities may propose to take we do not know. You may possibly hear further from them."

The two men took their somewhat stiff departure. De Fontanay opened the first door; Gaston the second. They all three listened to the sound of their receding footsteps.

"I think," De Fontanay proposed, "after these few minutes, not altogether devoid of incident, we should fortify ourselves. Gaston, three cocktails."

Estelle, who was now seated upon the edge of the writing table, permitted her hand to steal towards the blotting pad. Her fingers sought for a moment and returned with several sheets of closely written paper. She slipped them down into the bosom of her gown.

"We will drink," she suggested, "to the unfailing sagacity of those busybodies, the police."

CHAPTER XVII

THERE was a moment of tense silence; a silence possessing peculiar qualities. Almost instantaneously Estelle realized her error. She crossed with a jaunty little swing to the hearth rug, and adjusted her hat in the mirror. Then, opening her vanity case, she powdered her nose, touched her lips with a stick, and glanced furtively towards where Mark was standing, still in the same place; De Fontanay, frowning heavily, had moved a little in front of the door. Gaston made his courtly entrance. She turned around and received her cocktail.

"Ah, well," she said, "I will drink to your health, dear Marquis, who have given me shelter, and to yours, my dear but rather gloomy Mr. Van Stratton, who are presently going to accompany me home, for fear I should meet with more adventures."

They emptied their glasses almost in silence. Estelle drew her fur cape closer around her.

"You will accompany me, if you please," she told Mark.

De Fontanay shook his head regretfully. He was still standing directly between her and the door.

"Miss Dukane," he said, "it is regrettable that you should have invited to share your secret two men whom honour forbids to ignore it. I am of the French Secret Service. One of my responsibilities in this country is to superintend the labours of those whose duty it is to see that the secrets of the Conference shall be kept until the proper time for disclosure arises. My friend, Van Strat-

ton here, is in an even more definite position. He is officially placed at the Conference. He is less free than I to countenance the buying and selling of stolen information with regard to its doings. I regret that we can neither of us allow you to leave this room with the document which you were clever enough to conceal."

She remained with her hand holding her cape in its place, prepared for immediate departure.

"How do you propose to prevent me?" she asked insolently.

"By placing the truth before you as I have done," he replied gravely. "Those written words which you purchase to aid your father to make a few more superfluous millions have cost some man his honesty and would cost us our honour if we were to allow you to depart with them."

Her eyes blazed with cold anger. Her mouth took an ugly twist. The whole beauty of her expression was gone. She had the look of one about to burst into a diatribe of abuse. No words came, however. She restrained herself and turned instead to Mark.

"You have developed, my friend," she said smoothly, "the most amazing gift for silence. What do you think of this foolishness? Are you, too, one with your friend? A pretty pair from whom to seek help! Do you agree with him? This talk of honour! It is an absurdity! Why, all that is done to help my father is done to help the cause of Europe. That is what you are so foolish not to understand. What he had vowed to do is to bring peace, but in order to succeed he must have foreknowledge."

She had turned now directly to Mark. De Fontanay leaned back against the wall, watching them both. His fingers toyed with his cigarette case but there was anxiety in his eyes. When at last Mark spoke his voice sounded

unnatural, even to himself; the intonation of it somehow different. He addressed his friend.

"We had nothing to do with her getting the papers," he said. "I don't see how we can interfere."

"We know that it is stolen information," De Fontanay persisted gently. "Are we doing our duty—I to my department, you to the Conference—if we allow stolen information of these proceedings to pass into strange hands?"

"I don't see that it is our business," Mark reiterated, a little doggedly. "Felix Dukane is for peace as much as any of us are."

Estelle smiled at him, perhaps the most bewildering smile he had ever received from her, and the blood began to course through his veins, his brain to clear, his purpose to become more defined.

"If she hadn't told us," he went on, "we should never have known. If we found it out, it might have been different, but she trusted us."

"Of course I did," she assented. "I counted you both my friends. Before my father went to Paris we knew exactly the sort of document we should receive and the names to be mentioned in it. My father himself prepared the duplicate I carried with me. Naturally I brought it to-night, and it served its purpose. Perhaps I was foolish to let any one know of my little triumph," she went on, "but you two, my friends, I never dreamed that you would take advantage of my confidence."

"We will not," Mark declared firmly.

"The papers," De Fontanay insisted, "must be given up."

Estelle looked from one to the other of the two men; from the Marquis, slim, of medium height only, a slightly older man but evidently an athlete, to Mark, a young giant, with the physique of a gladiator, the long, lean

body and wonderful shoulders of a born fighting man, and there smouldered in her eyes something of the cruel joy of the woman who loves to stir the contending passions of men. Nevertheless, her tone was gentle, almost pleading.

"Marquis," she begged, "you hear what Mr. Van Stratton says. You two must not quarrel about this. You have made your protest. Mr. Van Stratton sees with me. He has given his word to escort me home safely. He must do it."

"See here, Raoul," Mark pleaded, "you know how it is with me. I may be prejudiced. Strictly speaking, you may be right. To-morrow morning, if you like, I'll tell every one what I've done and get kicked out of my job. We can't quarrel, you and I. We've been through too much together."

De Fontanay remained silent. His eyes were fixed upon his friend a little sadly.

"Mark," he said, "I wish we'd lunched somewhere else that day."

"Wishes don't help," was the momentarily bitter reply. "I may wish so myself before I get through. That doesn't affect this matter. You say it is dishonourable for us to let her go with the papers. I would feel equally dishonoured if I broke my word and stopped her. I hate to say it, Raoul, but a scrap between you and me—well, it couldn't be thought of. Wouldn't do us a bit of good, would it? I know you have a gun there but you wouldn't use it. Miss Dukane!"

Estelle obeyed his gesture and moved towards the door. Mark left his place and came between her and De Fontanay. The eyes of the two men met at closer quarters, and his friend suddenly understood the tragedy which lay behind Mark's apparent stubbornness. With a gesture of resignation, he opened the door.

"You are right, Mark," he acknowledged. "A scrap between us would only be ridiculous. Good night, Mademoiselle! My compliments!"

He bowed so low that he apparently failed to see the fingers she offered. Mark and Estelle passed out together, down to the street and into Estelle's taxi which was still waiting. She took her place in the furthest corner and patted the seat by her side with the hand from which she had already drawn her glove.

"You are a dear thing!" she murmured, with a very soft light in her eyes. "I am beginning to like you very much."

Her movement towards him was in itself almost a caress. His arms went round her unchecked. It seemed to him that as her head fell back, her eyes half closed, her lips came voluntarily towards his. A fierce satisfaction throbbed through all his senses. At least, she was no cheat. With what she had to offer she was willing to pay.

CHAPTER XVIII

Seated in the most comfortable chair of Mark's library, awaiting his return, he found a slim, sprucely dressed, shaven young man, his appearance disfigured only by a neatly arranged bandage round his head. Mark, who entered a little dazed, stared at him for a moment in surprise.

"I report myself as convalescent," the intruder observed, rising with a low bow. "The doctor gave me leave this afternoon to descend."

"Good God!" Mark exclaimed. "I had forgotten all about you."

The young man seemed hurt.

"Considering that it is only comparatively a few nights ago," he observed, "that you treated me as a corpse and propped me up against a tree in Richmond Park, thereby running grave risks, your lack of memory is a little remarkable."

"I admit it," Mark assented. "To tell you the truth, things have been marching some with me lately."

"For me," Brennan confided, "there has existed, since your first visit to me, a pleasing sense of security. Since I handed that key over to you I have slept at night and felt secure by day."

"That's all right anyhow," Mark told him. "The key is in my banker's strong room, and can only be fetched out on your signature or mine."

"An excellent idea!" Brennan approved. "The time, however, is close at hand when some use must be made of

the amazing information I have collected or it will be too late. Would you be so kind as to tell me at what stage of its deliberations the Conference at Whitehall has arrived?"

"I'll tell you nothing of the sort," Mark answered a little brusquely. "To be frank, I'm fed up with all this sort of thing, and the sooner you clear out and take your key and sell your information, whatever it is, the better I shall be satisfied. Ranching is what I was meant for, or some simple life. All this scheming and intrigue makes me sick."

He rang the bell viciously. His companion shrugged his shoulders.

"*Chacun à son goût*," he murmured airily. "For me, always, if you please, the life of intrigue. I say this, notwithstanding a pain in my head still reminiscent of Mr. Dukane's leaden stick, and your kindly attempt to dispose of my remains in the fog. I am rather like a cat, though. I am hard to kill, and whatever intrigues may disturb Europe for the next three weeks, it is I who have the key to the situation."

"Well, you'll have to look sharp if you're going to make use of it," Mark confided. "I'm not telling you any secret because it is announced in the papers to-night that the Conference is expected to give its decision, even its figures, within a fortnight."

"Before a fortnight, then, my little bomb shall explode," the other affirmed confidently. "Either it shall explode or I will become a rich man. It is hard to make up one's mind. This exploit of mine has been, without a doubt, the greatest success of my life. Greatly would I enjoy the triumph of announcing it, yet money means much in life and I am a poor man."

"So far," Mark observed, taking a cocktail from the tray which Robert had just brought in, "the possession

of this wonderful piece of information of yours doesn't seem to have brought you much luck."

"It has brought me a smashed head," the other admitted, raising his glass and bowing, "but it has also brought me the privilege of your acquaintance. I drink to my host's very good health."

He set down his glass empty and gazed musingly into the fire.

"From now on," he continued, "I commence to reap the reward of my exploit. I have to choose between fame and fortune. I think I shall choose fortune. I shall live in Switzerland. It is, after all, the safest and I think a very pleasant country."

"You seem to make yourself pretty comfortable wherever you go," Mark ventured, as his companion accepted a replenishment of his glass.

"A soldier of fortune," Brennan acknowledged.

"Are you—er—dining in?" Mark enquired. "I mean upstairs with your nurse, or down here?"

"It will give me great pleasure to join you," was the polite reply.

"I am afraid I didn't quite mean that," Mark explained. "As a matter of fact, I have to go round to the Embassy in a few minutes, and I'm dining elsewhere. Don't think I'm inhospitable. Stay here till you're absolutely well enough to move, but the sooner you get your key and make your deal for your information, the better I shall be pleased."

The young man coughed.

"I will confide in you," he said, "that it is my intention to leave early to-morrow morning. I am sorry that I shall not have the honour of your company at dinner to-night. It would give me great pleasure to tell you of my experiences during the war. I might convert you to some interest in my profession."

"I don't imagine your experiences during the war would make very good hearing for me," Mark replied. "However, I hope Andrews will look after you. I must go and change."

Half an hour later Mark presented himself for the second time that evening at the Embassy. Mr. Huventhayer was signing some letters in his library and welcomed him with a little wave of the hand.

"What is it, Mark?" he enquired. "I hear you've been in before."

Mark faced his ugly moment, his expression a little strained, his tone not altogether steady.

"I had to see you for a moment, sir," he declared. "I guess it would be better if I started in by giving you my resignation."

The Ambassador swung round. At that moment no one would have called him a suave, mild-mannered man. His expression was angry and credulous.

"You don't mean to tell me, Mark," he exclaimed, "that you've had enough of work already?"

"It isn't that, sir," Mark assured his Chief. "It is something altogether different. I've been up against it hard and I am afraid, from your point of view, I did the wrong thing."

"Tell me about it quickly," Mr. Huventhayer insisted.

Mark repeated his story word for word. His Chief whistled under his breath. There was a frown upon his forehead but something that was almost a smile upon his lips.

"So that doll-like little child fooled them!" he murmured thoughtfully. "She's got some of her father nerve, all right."

"The position is, sir," Mark pointed out, "that the Marquis de Fontanay would have had those papers from

her if I hadn't been there. It was I who insisted upon her getting away with them."

The Ambassador reflected for several moments before he spoke.

"It's a difficult situation, Mark," he admitted. "I've waded through the reports of the proceedings from the beginning and a duller rigmarole I never heard. I can't imagine what part of it could be worth five thousand pounds, even to Felix Dukane."

"I couldn't figure that out myself, sir," Mark agreed, beginning to feel more cheerful.

"The most serious part of the matter," Mr. Huventhayer went on, "is that any leakage at all from a Conference of that sort should be possible. The thing seems incredible, when one reflects how few there are of you who know anything about the proceedings. When poor young Dimsdale owned up, I felt that I had received the shock of my life, and now, within a week or so, we seem to be up against the same sort of thing. However, this is London, not Washington. It is the English Secret Service which appears to have gone to sleep."

The door of the library suddenly opened and Myra entered.

"If there are secrets I'm not listening," she called out to them from the further end of the dimly lit apartment. "We heard Mark was here and Mother wants him to stay for dinner."

She came smiling across the room, but paused when she realised a certain tenseness in the atmosphere. Mark was so tall that his head was outside the little circle of light, but Mr. Huventhayer's face, in the illumination of the green-shaded lamp, seemed almost haggard.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked. "Oughtn't I to have come in?"

Her father rose to his feet.

"Nothing whatever is the matter, dear," he replied. "As to dinner, why, do stop if you can, Mark."

The young man shook his head.

"I am sorry, sir," he said, "but if I could be excused to-night, I should be very glad."

Myra made a grimace. Mr. Huventhayer's face was still wrinkled with thought, and he seemed scarcely to have heard Mark's reply.

"I couldn't back myself to give the judgment of Solomon upon this matter," he admitted, rising to his feet and leading the way towards the door, "but this being London, not Washington, I hardly think that there was any call for you to have interfered. Forget it, Mark. Officially, I have already done so."

"You think I can stop on, sir?" Mark asked joyfully.

"Sure," was his Chief's terse decision. "The young lady's got away with the goods and that's all there is to it."

Mark drew a long breath of relief. Myra, who had been walking a little ahead, looked back.

"You're sure you can't dine, Mark?" she asked again.

He passed his arm through hers.

"Myra dear," he said, "if the King commanded me to dine at Buckingham Palace to-night, I should ask to be excused."

She glanced up into his face and realised the truth.

"That Dresden doll!" she exclaimed, with mock indignation.

CHAPTER XIX

Shortly before nine that evening, Mark arrived at Mario's and spent a pleasant but agitating quarter of an hour ordering dinner for two. At nine o'clock he took a risk and rushed down to the bar for a cocktail. At a quarter past he began to fidget. At half past he was stalking gloomily to and fro in the circumscribed limits of the entrance hall and becoming an object of some comment. At five and twenty minutes to ten, a radiant vision of chinchilla and lace, admiring attendants in her wake, Estelle arrived.

"I'm not late, am I?" she asked, as she offered her fingers. "I really couldn't remember what time we said."

"Not—particularly," he replied, with a sensation of immense relief. "Anyway, you're here!"

He led the way to the corner table which he had selected. It was not too near the orchestra and had the advantage of a certain isolation. Estelle looked around her and approved.

"My last few days of liberty," she sighed. "I am very angry, but for a time I must live the life of these others, and have a chaperone and go to those stupid parties one reads about every day. I like to be myself. I do not like to accept an invitation for weeks ahead and not know who is to be of the party. I bore myself when I do those things and yet it has to be."

"What is happening?" he enquired.

She made a little grimace.

"Father has taken Cruton House for three months,"

she confided. "We are going to establish ourselves there at once."

"The largest house in London!" he exclaimed.

She nodded.

"I shall not worry myself," she declared firmly. "We take over the whole staff of servants, a housekeeper, and a major-domo, and a person who acts as a sort of social secretary."

"It doesn't sound like your father at all," he remarked.

"It is not," she admitted. "He has an idea that entertaining may help him to round off the great scheme of his life. For myself, I am not so sure. From what I have seen of English politicians I do not think that they can be influenced by social means. Neither can the bankers."

"Still," Mark ventured, "I imagine one is a little better off by being in touch with all these people. What I'm surprised at is that your father should change his habits and methods of life so completely and so suddenly."

Estelle betrayed some curiosity in the menu, glancing through it and approving with one trifling amendment. She ate her oysters in appreciative silence. When she had finished she leaned back in her place and smiled at him.

"I think," she confided, "that my father's present scheme means more to him than anything else for which he has worked in life. It is not the matter of the profit, though that, of course, will be immense. You know what it is, of course."

"I have heard that he wants to finance Germany," Mark replied.

She nodded.

"That is what it amounts to," she admitted. "It is the vastness of the undertaking which attracts him, the fact that he will be launching the largest and most

difficult loan any single financier has ever attempted. It is just the same spirit, I suppose," she went on, watching with interest the slow dripping of some Amontillado into the turtle soup, "which keeps me also interested in his affairs."

"I call it a most unnatural hobby for a girl of your age," he complained.

She laughed at him.

"There will be plenty of time for the other things afterwards," she said soothingly. "As a matter of fact, we are getting very nearly to the end. Father has always said that he will retire next year, buy one of those derelict kingdoms in the East, marry me to the king, and administer its affairs himself. That is why we both take such an interest in Prince Andropulo."

"You have a fancy for being a queen?" he asked.

"The position has advantages," she confessed. "There would be no competition, you know, or anything of that sort. The only trouble of it is that most of the young men who might some day succeed—like Prince Andropulo —have made Paris their spiritual home and have lost all the romance of their upbringing. Prince Andropulo, for instance, knows much more about the restaurants and cabarets of Paris than he does about the old cities of Drome."

"He would," Mark assented emphatically.

"A pity you don't like him," she murmured. "In some respects he is an estimable young man and an excellent son. Was I really late this evening? I could not help it. My father arrived home from Croydon half an hour before I left. He had flown over and he was very much annoyed at a message which was waiting for him. He has had to go round to see the Home Secretary. I do not dislike England," she went on meditatively, "as much as I thought I should, but its official classes do show a most

lamentable desire to interfere with one's liberty of action."

Mark's eyes twinkled for a moment.

"Your father's ideas as to liberty of action might be considered a little broad," he ventured.

"You are thinking of that poor man Brennan. Well, I supose that was a little hasty," she admitted, with a reflective sigh.

"Is it Brennan who is causing the present trouble, do you think?" Mark enquired.

She shook her head.

"The trouble is that people do not understand my father's methods," she explained. "For the purposes of his business and propaganda he has always had a bureau and enquiry agents and that sort of thing. When he wants to get in touch with any one without committing himself, he is then in a position to bring the affair about naturally. It seems that in this country there are objections to a private establishment of that kind—'conspiracy', they call it, or some such ugly name. Poor Dad!" she sighed. "I expect he's having an uncomfortable evening, for he is so bad-tempered, and he dislikes so much interference from anybody; but as for me," she added, leaning over suddenly and patting the back of his hand, "I amuse myself immensely here with you."

"It is a perfectly wonderful evening for me," he assured her fervently.

"Are you going to get into any trouble on my account?" she asked, looking at him for once almost gravely.

"I don't think so," he answered. "You see, after all, we are Americans, and it isn't up to us to help the British police. The Chief seems to take that view. I'd like to ask you something, Miss Estelle?"

"I consider," she said softly, "that if you wish to you have earned the right to call me Estelle."

He raised her fingers for a moment to his lips in ecstatic gratitude.

"Estelle, then. That day when we first met at the Ritz, was it just a guess on your part that I was going to be offered a job at the Embassy?"

She shook her head.

"I knew."

"Dimsdale?" he asked eagerly.

She assented without speech. Her admission was a shock to him. He sat in silence for several moments, his plate neglected.

"Was Dimsdale a friend of yours?" she enquired. "If so, I am sorry. You must admit, however, that he was a poor weak sort of creature. He owed money nearly everywhere in London. One of Father's agents brought him to us and I can assure you he was not very difficult. He would have sold us every scrap of information he could get together for money enough to keep that little girl at Daly's faithful to him. We did not want anything of that sort, though. My father never meddles in politics proper. He is only interested in the little things which affect his own enterprises."

"Did you single me out," Mark asked grimly, "as being a likely successor to Dimsdale?"

She laughed heartily, raised her glass and drank to him.

"If ever I did, I can assure you that I have entirely given up the idea," she told him. "I have abandoned all hopes of being able to suborn you, Mr. Mark Van Stratton."

"Mark," he corrected her.

"Very well then, Mark," she acquiesced. "Besides, although I say little about it, you must not think that I am ungrateful. You have rendered me two very great services."

She flung down her napkin. The first bars of a familiar tune crept out into the room.

"One of ours," she murmured, rising and holding out her arms. "Come! We dance. *Maître d'hôtel!*"

They glided off. Even in the midst of his moment of joy—she came so lightly into his arms—he felt his sense of humour, his growing understanding of her, irresistibly appealed to, by the Frenchwoman's imperious gesture to the waiter, and the obsequious hastening of their plates on to the electric warmer which stood by their table.

There were two encores, and it was a quarter of an hour later before they resumed their places and their dinners.

"Tell me what has become of Andropulo?" Mark enquired.

She shook her head indifferently.

"I have annoyed him," she confided, "and he has gone to Paris. I am not sorry. Father would like Drome very much, but I am quite sure that I should not like Prince Andropulo."

Mark leaned a little back in his place and laughed. He watched the replenishment of his glass of champagne with satisfaction.

"Estelle," he said, "if I were not in love with you, I should find you the most fascinating study of any woman I have ever met. Not that I know much about women, because I don't," he added, "but you are amazingly different, you know. You are so subtly ingenuous, to be paradoxical."

"I do not know what you mean," she complained. "When I want things I try to get them. That is not unusual. I do not think that I am such a hypocrite as many of the women of your country who pretend so much affection for people and things which they do not possess. There are a few things missing in my character

to which you are accustomed. Otherwise it is not at all a bad one."

"And those things that are missing?" he asked.

"I have very little sentiment," she admitted, "and what I have is seriously affected by a somewhat troublesome sense of humour. And again I think I have some of my father's cruelty. I can be very cruel, you know."

"I can quite believe it," Mark acquiesced feelingly.

"My admirers," she went on, "always end their periods of devotion by calling me unfaithful. That I deny. I am only unfaithful to what I have seemed to be and have not been. No women of any race in the world have ever bored so many great men into their graves with unwearying and intolerable fidelity as Englishwomen and Americans. Frenchwomen are not at all like that, but they do carry with them, I think—some of them—a fidelity the nature of which few people understand. It certainly does not consist in locking your arms around a man's neck and keeping them there until he can scarcely breathe all through his life."

"Very soon," he asserted hopefully, "I shall begin to understand a little about you."

"I shall never offer the golden key of myself to any man," she rejoined, "but I think that I give you more chances than any one else I ever met. It rests with you, rather, does it not, what use you put them to? You have a great many prejudices to overcome before you will understand and then it might not be worth while."

"You have never talked to me seriously before," he reminded her.

"I have never—have not yet—made up my mind to take you seriously," she confided. "There are times when you please me. There are times when you irritate me beyond endurance. This evening you broke out of yourself. You did something which showed me, from my

point of view, greatness. You see, I am grateful. That is why I offered you this afternoon in that silly taxicab, and I am offering you to-night, dear Mark, more of myself than any one else has ever had."

"And that is why," he declared, dropping his voice to a passionate whisper, "it is to-night I know, beyond any question, that for the rest of my life you are the one woman I love."

She leaned away from him, her eyes a little averted, a smile upon her lips which had in its nature something almost reminiscent. The moment had passed. Presently her head began to move slowly to the music. Without a word, with scarcely a glance at each other, they rose and danced.

Dorchester wandered in at about eleven o'clock and begged for a seat at their table whilst he waited for a supper party.

"A nice nightmare for me to face, this, at the commencement of what should be an evening of gaiety," he grumbled, as he accepted a glass of wine.

Estelle threw herself back in her chair and laughed.

"A nightmare!" she protested. "Never have I been called such a thing."

"The nightmare is seeing you here alone with Mark," he explained gloomily.

"You do not expect us to go away, I hope," she said, "because frankly I shall not. I think we shall probably stay very late. I am enjoying myself very much."

"You have given Mark all the opportunities," Dorchester complained. "You forget that I am a working man, toiling for my country down at Westminster. When will you dine with me here, Miss Dukane?"

She shook her head.

"Not with you or with any one else for a long time,"

she regretted, mournfully. "We are exchanging Bohemia for the other things. Father has taken Cruton House for three months and as soon as we have settled there and I am installed as hostess with, I believe, one or even two chaperones, I shall certainly not be able to dine out alone with any young man."

Dorchester was a little surprised.

"Well," he observed, "your father is probably the only man left in Europe who could take Cruton House, but I didn't know that he cared for that sort of thing. By the bye, my sisters are supping here to-night. May I bring them over, Miss Dukane? They would like so much to meet you. We might perhaps—er—join up?" he suggested tentatively.

"I should say not," Mark pronounced with decision.

Estelle shook her head sweetly.

"I should love to meet your sisters," she said, "but we had better leave it until we are established. To-night must be considered as my last fling."

"If you have finished your champagne, old chap," Mark put in cheerfully, "I believe there are some of your party looking around for you."

Dorchester rose to his feet unwillingly.

"We move into Cruton House next Monday unless Father is in prison or exiled before then," Estelle announced. "He is in a little trouble at the present, I believe. You must come and see me directly we are there."

"I shall be amongst your first callers," Dorchester promised. "As for you, Mark," he added, frowning at him, "you are trying our friendship very high. I am not one of those generous fellows you only come across in novels, who swallow their disappointment and shake hands with their successful rivals. If I drop in for a cocktail to-morrow evening it will be a piece of great

magnanimity. The worst of it is that your man Robert is the only fellow I know who can be trusted with the absinthe. *Au revoir.*"

"Almost humorous to-night, wasn't he?" Mark observed, as his friend moved off towards the door.

"Do you think," she asked, "that he likes me as much as you do?"

"I am sure that he doesn't," was the prompt reply. "No one else could."

"Not even Prince Andropulo? He comes, as he tells me often, of a passionate race. His mother confides in me three or four times a day that he would have made a wonderful husband for any woman who always obeyed him and realised what a great man he really was. Surely I know that little brown-haired girl next to Lord Dorchester. She is the daughter of your Ambassador, is she not? Why does she look at you so sadly, Mark? Confess, have you been flirting with her?"

He shook his head.

"I don't think," he explained, as he waved his hand to Myra, "that we understand the word over in the States as you do here. Our young people are all friends together and those who like one another best gravitate towards each other, of course. I have carried her about since she was a baby—taught her to swim and play golf, led the cotillion at her coming-out dance, and all that sort of thing. As to flirting—no, I've never flirted with her. I don't think I've ever wanted to flirt with any one very much until now."

"Do you dare insinuate that you are only flirting with me?" she demanded, with a show of indignation.

"You can call it what you like," he answered. "What I want in plain words is to marry you—to-morrow if possible."

"And I," she said, rising, "wish to dance. I am not

a self-conscious person but we are very much the subject of conversation at Lord Dorchester's table. I cannot make up my mind whether they like my frock or not. I am perfectly certain that Myra doesn't approve of my hair, and the tall lady, who is evidently chaperoning the party, is explaining that she does not consider it right for me to be here alone with you. She thinks it's going too far, even for a foreigner."

"We could put the matter right," he suggested, "by getting a special licence in the morning and dining here at night."

"An enticing prospect," she murmured, "but there is that poor father of mine. He wants a king for a son-in-law."

"He'll never get one," Mark asserted.

"I haven't quite made up my mind yet," she reminded him, leaning a little away in the dance and looking up at him so that her weight rested upon his arm.

"Make it up to-night," he begged, leaning down.

"Do you realise," she confided, "that I am twenty-five years old, that I received my first proposal when I was seventeen and that I have been all these years trying to make up my mind? Obviously I can't do it now in five minutes."

"No reason why you shouldn't do it in one," he rejoined. "Then," he added, after a glance over his shoulder and a momentary start of surprise, "I can order another bottle of champagne and invite your father to drink our healths."

"My father?" she repeated.

He nodded and stopped dancing. They were by their table and a few yards away, preceded by a *maître d'hôtel*, approached Mr. Dukane.

"This won't mean trouble for you, I hope?" Mark asked, looking down at her anxiously.

She scoffed at the idea as she welcomed her father with a smile.

"Do not be absurd!" she exclaimed. "I can't imagine why he has come but he must join us, of course. We will go on dancing just the same, though, and I will sit next you."

CHAPTER XX

Mr. Dukane was, for him, almost gracious. He offered no immediate explanation of his presence, but greeted his daughter pleasantly, shook hands with Mark, and took the place allotted to him without comment.

"I am thinking," he announced, "of getting myself denaturalised."

"I would not," Estelle recommended. "I do not know exactly what it means but it sounds unpleasant. Order Father some wine, Mr. Van Stratton. I think that some one has been worrying him."

"Every administrative department of this country," Mr. Dukane declared, "is rotten. The rottenest of all is their police department and what they fatuously call the Home Secret Service."

"Cliquot 1911," Mark ordered quickly. "Fresh glasses. Fruit. Mr. Dukane, you'll eat something?"

"I will," the latter assented, stretching out his hand for the menu. "I crossed in a plane which seemed to strike every bad pocket of air in the skies, reached Croydon an hour late, and then was practically ordered to Scotland Yard and from there to the Home Office. I'll take some cutlets and some fruit afterwards."

"Were they very annoying?" Estelle asked.

"They were so annoying," her father replied severely, "that I am seriously considering taking the course I hinted at. I think that I will buy a country of my own and make my own laws."

"I have been telling Mr. Van Stratton about that,"

Estelle observed. "The trouble of it is that I should have to marry the king, shouldn't I?"

Mr. Dukane indicated by a gesture that he was not in the mood for frivolities. He leaned across towards Mark.

"I came here to-night," he confided, "to talk with you. Where is Max Brennan?"

"He is still, to the best of my belief," Mark replied, "occupying my guest chamber in Curzon Street. He was gracious enough to invite me to dine at home with him this evening."

"He would," Mr. Dukane grunted. "If you give him free quarters he'll live with you for the rest of his life. Is this young man to be trusted, Estelle?"

"I think so," she answered. "He did me a great service this afternoon, and he still wants to marry me."

Mr. Dukane brushed the idea aside contemptuously.

"That's nothing," he scoffed. "Lots of them who do not know you want to do that."

She leaned back in her seat with a charming little grimace.

"Utterly uncalled for, especially from one's own father," she protested. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Van Stratton is getting to know me very well indeed, and the more he knows me the more he wants to marry me. He mentioned something about a special licence and to-morrow."

"You will kindly refrain from talking nonsense for a few minutes," Mr. Dukane insisted curtly. "You have had conversations with your guest, I presume?" he added, turning to Mark.

"Very one-sided ones. I have listened to him quite a good deal.

"You know that on the occasion of his visit to me in Norfolk Street, he brought me information he wanted

me to buy? Unfortunately I lost my temper and the negotiations did not proceed."

"Yes, I know that," Mark assented.

"We all make mistakes," Felix Dukane confessed. "I made one then. There was a certain taint of melodrama about his chief discovery which appealed more to my sense of humour than to my brain. I realise now that I was wrong. The matter is of tremendous, of vital importance."

"He believes that himself," Mark declared. "He seems absolutely convinced that what he has to disclose will stagger the whole world."

"What's he going to do about it?" Mr. Dukane demanded.

Mark hesitated. Yet, after all, Brennan had made no secret of his intentions, had not even spoken in confidence.

"I think his idea seems rather to offer himself as a witness at the Conference," he confided.

Mr. Dukane's underlip shot out. There were wicked fires in his eyes.

"Fool! Idiot!" he exclaimed. "What would he get for that? Not one penny. He'll set the Conference a puzzle which will only embarrass them, and he'll ruin the whole of my work out of sheer and imbecile vanity."

"The matter isn't altogether clear to me, of course," Mark acknowledged, "but it seems to me that now the fellow is well enough to discuss things, the best course for you to take would be to reopen negotiations with him. I warn you, you may find him difficult. He is naturally a little prejudiced against you."

"I don't see that there's anything else to be done," Mr. Dukane admitted grudgingly. "I don't often make a mistake, but it seems I did here. Where do you say the fellow is now?"

"Still at my house, I believe. He was there when I changed."

Mr. Dukane inspected his cutlets and approved.

"If you two want to do any more dancing," he suggested, "better get on with it. I am going to ask you, sir, to take me round to Curzon Street presently."

"You'll make it a friendly discussion," Mark begged, as he rose to his feet.

Mr. Dukane grunted assent.

"I'll handle him carefully this time," he promised.

"I've never known your father quite so amiable," Mark observed, as they moved off into the throng.

"That's because he wants your help," she warned him.

"I'll do what I can, of course," Mark promised. "Your father must understand, though, that violence is of no use now. This chap Brennan has got his papers locked up where no one except he or I could get at them."

"He or you," she repeated.

Mark nodded.

"Yes, he seems to have a sort of fancy to trust me. I suppose these chaps have to work alone a great deal. He doesn't appear to have any one else to turn to."

"He never has had," she said. "He has always worked alone—generally at smaller things, though. Once he was one of my father's men. This is quite the biggest undertaking he has ever brought off."

For several minutes the dancing absorbed them and they were silent. Then he swung her dexterously out of the crush into a distant corner of the room.

"It occurs to me," he whispered, "that for the immediate present we had better avoid the neighbourhood of our table. Your father has finished his cutlets, drunk his wine, and is sitting there with an air of expectancy."

"Then it would be better if we went back," she advised

him earnestly. "You see he is seldom in so good a humour with any one. His attitude towards you to-night was positively benevolent. We must not spoil it. There will be other evenings."

"As many evenings as go to the making of a life," he answered, obeying promptly.

Estelle had correctly divined the situation. Her father watched their return with satisfaction.

"I regret to break up your little party," he said, "but I should like to be taken to Brennan. I wish to see him to-night."

"I'll take you right along there now, sir," Mark promised.

He paid his bill and they left, driving to Curzon Street in Mark's car, which was the first to arrive.

"Is Mr. Brennan still up?" his master enquired of Andrews, who admitted them.

"He is in the library, sir," the man answered, throwing open the door.

They all entered. Brennan was there, very much at his ease. He was seated in Mark's favourite easy-chair, his feet poised upon the tall leather-bound fender. He was smoking what appeared to be a very excellent cigar, and a bottle of whisky, a syphon, half empty, and a tumbler in the same condition were by his side. He turned his head at once at the opening of the door and when he recognised the newcomers his hand slipped down towards the pocket of his jacket. Mark spoke at once reassuringly.

"Nothing to fear, Brennan," he said. "Mr. Dukane has given his word as to that. This is a friendly visit."

"But I do not wish to receive a friendly visit from Mr. Dukane," Brennan declared, with visible signs of irritation. "My head is still very painful."

"The whole affair was a mistake," Mr. Dukane ac-

knowledged. "I was too hasty. I apologise. No need to dwell upon it. You are all right now. You seem to have found pretty comfortable quarters too. I've come to talk business."

"There was a time," Brennan reminded him, "when I came to talk business with you. I did not like my reception. Now you come to me. Why should I receive you differently? I am not a strong man like you, nor have I a young Goliath to protect me, but it would give me great pleasure to make your head ache."

"Come," Mr. Dukane proposed soothingly, settling himself in the easy-chair which Mark had drawn up, "let us waste no time. Your visit to Norfolk Street was an unfortunate incident. Let us obliterate the memory of it. You came to talk business with me and I was hasty. To-day I consider the matter differently."

"So do I," Brennan rejoined coldly.

"You further angered me," Mr. Dukane continued, "by asking a lunatic price for your information. However, that matter also I have reconsidered. Produce your proofs. I have my cheque book in my pocket. I will pay your price."

Brennan sat up a little in his chair. Although he had been lounging there for most of the evening and had not changed for dinner he still gave the impression of impeccable neatness. Even his flaxen hair was unruffled, the bandage neatly tied.

"Is your balance large, Mr. Dukane?" he enquired.

"Speak of things which concern you," was the curt retort. "You asked me two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. I will give it to you. You can draw the money over the counter to-morrow."

Brennan looked across at Estelle, whom he had more than once, since her entrance into the room, regarded with admiration. His slim, white fingers played with his tie.

"Years ago when I used to serve your father, Miss Dukane," he said, addressing her, "he was not so foolish a man. He knew what he wanted, and he generally got it. Now he has made a mistake. A bargain which is once refused may never again present itself. What was worth two hundred and fifty thousand pounds a week ago may be worth a million to-day."

"The value of things," Mr. Dukane pointed out, "depends upon what market there is for them. If you do not sell to me, your only other course would be to present this document to the Conference now sitting, or to make a bargain with a sensational press. What good would that do to any one? The British and French Secret Services between them might ultimately dole you out a few hundred pounds or the newspaper a thousand or so. You would be throwing away a fortune."

"You forget," Brennan reminded him, "there are the bankers—two in Hamburg, one in Berlin, one in Frankfort. I think probably they might become clients of mine. Von Hustein, for example, is a rich man."

"I am buying on their account, as well as my own, of course," was Mr. Dukane's impatient reply. "I am saving you the trouble of collecting."

"That fact I realise," Brennan continued. "Chiefly on account of your own, I fancy, because if my revelations are made before the Conference closes its sessions I do not believe that this very magnificent loan which is going to astonish the world and bring glory to the great 'Mystery Millionaire' will ever come to anything."

There was a brief silence. Mr. Dukane's underlip was once more pushed out. His heavy eyebrows were almost joining. His eyes were points of fire.

"I did ill to part with you, Brennan," he admitted. "You were irritating, but you were one of my best men."

"I was your very best," Brennan asserted. "Indeed, you were wrong to part with me. You were wrong, when, after long hesitation, I came to you in Norfolk Street, to treat me brutally. You make your third mistake to-night when you come here and attempt to bargain with me as if I were a creature without heart or soul, a machine for the collection of money, a poor creature to be dismissed, beaten or made use of according to your will. My secrets are my own, Felix Dukane. You can put your cheque book away. I do not deal with you. Already I have told this generous young host of mine that I will not do so. Why does he bring you here—you and your daughter?"

"It seemed reasonable to imagine that you might change your mind," Mark pointed out. "Mr. Dukane here is surely right when he says that you have only a limited market."

Brennan sat bolt upright in his chair with military stiffness. His strange eyes flashed. There was a little patch of angry colour in his cheeks.

"Market!" he repeated angrily. "You make the world stink with your gabble of money and markets, you people of wealth. Here am I, a poor man, and I refuse a fortune for the work of my brains; work for which I risked my life daily, work for which I changed my name half a dozen times, lived in poverty, spent my last penny, schemed underground and aboveground, carrying my life in my hands a dozen times a week. I won out. What I won is not to be measured up into pounds, shillings and pence. It has a greater value. Shall I tell you what it means to me? Revenge! The gratification of my pride, a breath of the real spirit of living. Do not look at me as though I were a lunatic. I am sane. We may have our hobbies, even we who work as I do. My document

is going on to the table at the Conference, and you, Felix Dukane, brute and would-be murderer that you are, are going to fail in the one really great ambition of your life. You are going to fail because I say so."

Dukane remained throughout the whole of Brennan's harangue motionless, listening, but with an almost abstracted air. When it was over he turned abruptly to Mark.

"Is this fellow out of the doctor's hands yet?" he asked.

"I believe so," Mark replied.

"And what about that sort of thing?" Mr. Dukane added, pointing to the bottle of whisky.

"He drinks moderately enough, so far as I know," Mark acknowledged.

Dukane rose to his feet.

"Very well," he said, "I make you a last and definite offer, Brennan. I will give you your price—two hundred and fifty thousand pounds for the result of your work."

"I reject your offer," was the prompt reply.

"Then," Felix Dukane warned him, "you will accept my enmity. Few people have profited by it, Brennan. Is it what you choose?"

"It is what I choose."

"No use my saying a word, I suppose," Mark intervened, strolling over from the sideboard with a tumbler of whisky and soda in his hand.

"You are my host," Brennan replied. "I owe you every courtesy. Speak if you wish."

"Perhaps I don't know enough of this affair to butt in very successfully," Mark confessed, "but I can't see, Brennan, that you're doing any one in the world a shadow of good by using the result of your work in the manner you suggest. On the contrary, you will do uni-

versal harm. You will place the Conference in a most uncomfortable position. They will have to postpone their findings whilst they sift the evidence, and their final report will have to be delayed till God knows when. I wouldn't mind betting you, Brennan, that even supposing your revelations are as sensational as you boast, the Conference, with the exception of course of the French members, would rather be without them. Take your document to the Conference and you will be in the childish position of cutting off your nose to spite your face. A quarter of a million of money is worth having nowadays, and you are a young man still. Be a sensible fellow and deal with Mr. Dukane."

"It is finished?" Brennan enquired courteously.

"It is all I have to say," Mark admitted.

"Mademoiselle will perhaps like to add her word," Brennan suggested, turning towards Estelle, who was seated in the background.

"There seems to be nothing left for me to say," Estelle rejoined. "The cleverest men are children sometimes, but I never yet came across one foolish enough to sacrifice a fortune to gratify his spite. No, I have nothing to say."

"Before we depart," Mr. Dukane asked, "would there be any objection to my using your telephone for a moment, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"Certainly not, sir," Mark replied, bringing him over a table instrument.

"I do not often speak myself," Mr. Dukane continued. "Enquire, if you please, for Number 1,000 XYZ. It is a private installation."

Mark took the instrument over. Brennan was listening with an air of mild amusement.

"Am I concerned in this?" he enquired. "Perhaps you would like me to leave."

"I should prefer your remaining," was the brusque reply.

"One thousand XYZ is on the line," Mark announced, a few moments later, passing over the receiver.

Mr. Dukane nodded and took up the instrument.

"Is that the Chief Commissioner of Police?" he enquired. "Good! Sorry to trouble you so late. This is Dukane speaking. You will remember that I had an interview with you to-night on my return from Paris—you and the Home Secretary."

There was a moment's silence. Brennan was sitting a little forward in his chair. He had laid down his cigar. His eyes were blinking fast under their sandy lashes.

"Quite so," Mr. Dukane continued, after a pause. "I have nothing more to say on that subject. You may remember, however, in the course of our conversation, you alluded to the extreme measures adopted by certain international agents in the pursuit of oddments of information. You instanced the case of an English officer in Cologne who was murdered simply because he had succeeded in obtaining the plans of a huge munition factory to be built in Russia with German capital. This affair, of course, is quite outside the sphere of my interests, but by the merest chance I happen to know where to put my hand upon the man—"

"Stop!" Brennan interrupted.

Felix Dukane's hand covered the mouth of the receiver. He turned his head slowly.

"I shall sell, damn you!" Brennan declared.

Dukane uncovered the telephone mouthpiece and continued.

"Forgive the interruption," he begged. "I believe I am in a position to hand you information as to the murderer of that English officer. If I am satisfied that that is the case, I shall take the liberty of asking for

an interview to-morrow. Thank you very much. Good night!"

He replaced the instrument and turned around.

"The banks," he observed, "open at ten. Would it be convenient if I called here in my car at that hour?"

Brennan, only the shadow of his former consequential little self, nodded.

"I shall be ready," he muttered.

Mr. Dukane rose to his feet and Mark accompanied his guests into the hall.

"Mr. Van Stratton," Felix Dukane acknowledged, "I am in your debt."

"I am glad to hear that you consider yourself so," Mark replied promptly. "I may take the liberty of reminding you of the fact before long."

CHAPTER XXI

Frances took off her gloves, laid them by her plate, and looked around her almost wistfully. There was in her grey, thoughtful eyes an expression of half-agitated reminiscence. It was the same little restaurant, with its Soho-like bustle and its shaded lights, its coarse but clean linen, the few flowers in cheap vases, the monotonous collection of fruit, the chameleonic expression of the short, podgy proprietor, whose eyes were everywhere, all geniality and smiles for his guests, all severity and angry glances for a delinquent waiter. The smell of food, the haze of smoke, the chatter of voices, pitched in a somewhat higher key than an ordinary English restaurant, all brought back to her mind the first time she had dined there with the man who was now her companion—the first time and many times since.

"So we're really here again," she observed. "It must be nearly a year."

"The time slips by," the young man admitted. "Shouldn't have thought it had been as much as that, though."

"A year within a few days," she reflected.

He straightened his tie and glanced at himself in the mirror by their side.

"Well," he remarked, "we've neither of us done so badly, eh? Both of us learned a thing or two since then! You've got on, of course, better than I have in a way, but I haven't done so badly. I'm earning at least three quid a week more than I used to, and some extras. I've stumbled across rather a good thing in that way.

There's no doubt about it," he went on, "if you're clever and keep your eyes open in this world, things come to you."

"What sort of things?" she asked.

"Outside ways of making money," he explained glibly. "Some time I'll tell you about 'em. You don't look a day older, Frances."

"Don't I?" she answered, also with a side glance at the mirror.

"There's something about you," he continued, leaning a little forward, "makes you quite different from other girls—the sort of girls one takes out, you know; doll themselves up no end, use stuff on their lips and cheeks and have their hair done all stiff and wavy by a hairdresser. I used to think—you won't be cross—that you looked a little old-fashioned. Damned if I don't think you're just clever, Frances. You've got what they call 'style'—something superior, you know. I have never forgotten what a shock it gave me to see you sitting up there with that young American toff the other day. Why, I was thinking a lot of myself because I was at Mario's at all, and there you were, drinking champagne and dancing away as though you had been used to it all your life."

"It was quite a wonderful evening," she remarked thoughtfully.

He looked across the table with something which was almost a scowl.

"I say, Frances, there's nothing between you and that young fellow, is there?"

"A certain amount of friendship, I hope," she answered.

"You see," he proceeded earnestly, "you don't know much of the world—not as I do. That young fellow was one of the American polo team last year. He's a mil-

lionaire, and they say he's just joined the American Embassy. Those fellows want keeping in their places, Frances, what?"

"I have never found the need with Mr. Van Stratton," Frances rejoined, her reminiscent smile a little tinged with bitterness.

"Seen him since?"

"I was working within a few feet of him this morning. He talked for a quarter of an hour afterwards," she replied. "He asked me when I was ready to come out to dinner again with him."

"What did you say?"

"I said any evening he was good enough to ask me," Frances answered calmly.

"You know this won't do," Mr. Sidney Howlett grumbled, leaning across the table. "It's not like you either, Frances. You can't be going about with more than one man at the same time."

"Can't you?" she replied carelessly. "I think I should find it quite easy, provided they ask me. Must I remind you that it is a year within a week since you did me the honour to seem even aware of my existence."

"I've made a bad break, Frances," the young man acknowledged. "I like frankness and when I'm wrong I'm ready to admit it. We didn't get on very well that night and afterwards I thought it best to keep away for a bit."

"We didn't get on very well," Frances rejoined, "because I told you that with the six pounds a week I was earning and the eight pounds a week you said you were making, it seemed to me that we ought to be thinking about getting married, if ever you meant to get married at all. I was lonely and I was idiot enough to be frank about it. You agreed to think the matter over and you went away. I heard nothing of you at all for over two

months and then I received a sort of half-hearted invitation to tea."

"We won't go into all that," he begged. "What I felt was, Frances, that before we got married and settled down we ought to have had something saved."

"At the time I had two hundred pounds in the bank," Frances observed. "If you had nothing it was your own fault."

"I am hoping very much," he confided significantly, "that before very long we shall have a great deal more than that in the bank. However, we must see how our friend Giovanni has been getting on with his cooking. Soup looks all right."

They commenced their dinner, the young man disposing of his *petite marmite* with audible enthusiasm. The conversation with the service of food became a little more general and a trifle disconnected. Frances alone preserved still that faint air of aloofness, as though her actual presence there were in a way accidental. Her large eyes wandered everywhere throughout the room. Not even the famous Chianti brought a flush to her not unbecomingly pale cheeks.

"Glad to be here again?" he asked.

"Very," she answered. "It seems quite natural."

"Poor sort of show after Mario's," he ventured.

"In a way, yes," she admitted. "In a way, no. I think this is more our *métier*."

The young man fumbled with his tie.

"I don't know," he said complacently. "One must see all sides of life, of course, if one wants to get on in this world. I must say I felt quite at home at Mario's. It's a club, you know. Some day or other we might join."

"We might," she murmured enigmatically.

"Of course the food here is good of its sort," he went on, attacking his fish, the mysterious origin of which was

concealed by its filleted condition and an amazing superabundance of sauce. "I wouldn't say anything against it, and after a long day's work, and you there, Frances, and a bottle of wine, why, just anything tastes good to me."

"You're improving in conversation," she remarked. "Is this Miss Hampstead's tuition?"

"I wish you'd believe me, Frances," he assured her earnestly, "when I tell you that that little affair is O R P H—off. I have had some big orders from old Hampstead, at a time when I needed them, too, and I make myself useful by taking the old lady and the girls out now and then when the old man's tired. It's good business for me and it suits them. All the same, those girls will have twenty thousand pounds each when they're married—Jewesses too. What do you think would happen if I were to go and propose myself? Why, I should just get shown the door."

"It seems a pity," Frances sympathised. "The smaller one—the one who doesn't squint—might be almost nice-looking if she didn't wear such staring clothes."

Mr. Sidney Howlett coughed. He had secretly thought their clothes rather smart.

"Well, anyhow, that's that!" he wound up. "What's more important, Frances, is about you and me."

"What about us?" Frances asked with interest but without excitement.

The arrival of a dismembered chicken in a brown pot proved a hindrance to intimate conversation for a time. A forlorn-looking salad followed and wine glasses were replenished. Mr. Sidney Howlett was reminded again of his long day's work and his consequent appetite. He showed admirable powers of concentration.

"One more course, and then dessert," he announced. "Things here haven't changed much, have they, Frances?"

She shook her head. There was the same old lady taking a benevolent view of her clients from a raised desk, a Swiss lady, with gold-rimmed spectacles, and severe but kindly expression, and one or two *habitués*. The head waiter was changed, but two of the other waiters had recognised and welcomed them.

"Yes, it all seems about the same," she admitted. "We are the people who have altered, I suppose."

"I shouldn't say we'd done much of that," he observed. "I don't feel any different."

"I do," she acknowledged. "In a way I've had a bad year, Sidney."

"A bad year!" he repeated. "Come, I like that! You've had your photograph in several of the illustrated papers—'The Premier Lady Secretary' they called you in one. You've been working for Cabinet Ministers and all sorts of toffs and now you are the only woman secretary admitted to the Conference. A bad year! I like that, I must say!"

"I'm not talking about my work just now," she confided. "I am thinking about my life, inside. I have been wretchedly lonely."

"I'm sorry about that, old girl," he ventured.

"I have worked very hard all my life," she went on. "I have read very little and I haven't had time for much thinking. In the gulf of this last year I seem to have stumbled against all sorts of new emotions, new miseries. There must have been some sort of change inside me. I don't know. From twenty-eight to twenty-nine isn't a particularly eventful epoch of any one's life, yet it seems to have been one of my milestones. I never thought there was so much pain in the world that didn't come from actual trouble, so much pain that sort of woke up inside one for want of things."

He stared at her, his weak eyes blinking quickly. She

seemed to be looking through him. He reached out and patted her hand across the table.

"Poor old thing!" he murmured. "Shouldn't have left you alone all this time."

"It was scarcely you personally," she told him. "It was the things you represented. You see, for two or three years we were together a good deal and with that amazing, inconsequential narrowness of a woman I forgot to notice that there were other men in the world, and then you stopped coming and it was a little late."

The young man's hand caressed his stubbly moustache, carefully cut to imitate the military style of a few years ago. On the whole, he felt that this was rather flattering.

"Well," he said, "if you've had a bad year, Frances, I should like to make the next one a good one for you. I believe I see a way in which, if I can bring you to my way of thinking, we might get married in about six months—get married comfortably, mind, with a little house of our own, anywhere you like to choose. They're opening up some new places about fifteen miles out on the Great Northern—slap up little houses, cement fronts and gables, and a garden, with fields all round and cheap season tickets—regular little Garden Cities where they've got a cinema and golf links and tennis courts of their own. And my work being a bit independent, I needn't go in Saturdays, and, if my scheme comes off, now and then not on Mondays, either. What about that? Sounds all right, doesn't it?"

The smile at the corners of her lips puzzled him. He could never have realised the conflict between her two selves; the primitivism of the woman and the mockery of her brain.

"What is this scheme of yours, Sidney?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Not here. Too many ears around. Tell you going home."

They drank coffee, smoked several cigarettes, and Sidney Howlett chatted for a few minutes in a lordly fashion with the proprietor, explaining that the more important class of customers with whom he was now coming in touch demanded entertainment farther west—Mario's and those sort of places—but he'd be back as often as he could. Frances listened with the old smile upon her lips. She made no objection when he slipped his hand under her arm, as they left the place. They walked to Oxford Street and took a bus to Battersea.

"I'd have taken you to the pictures, Frances," he told her, "but I'd really like to get this talk off my chest."

"You're making me very curious," she confessed.

"Well, you won't have much longer to wait," he pointed out, as they crossed the river, eight a side in a crowded bus, steaming with the odour of mackintoshes and wet umbrellas.

Frances drew a sigh of relief when they alighted.

"You're coming up then?" she asked.

"If I may."

They mounted the flights of stone stairs and entered her simple little apartment on the fifth floor. She lit the lights, turned on the gas stove and glanced speculatively into her cupboard.

"I used to keep a bottle of whisky for you," she observed, "but I've nothing of that sort now. If you want some more coffee later—"

"Capital!" he declared. "Now come on, old girl! You know how I used to like to have you."

He seated himself in the easy-chair, with a footstool close to his knee. She hesitated for a moment.

"I'm not quite sure, Sidney," she said.

He laughed and drew her down, advancing his knee

for her support. She sat with clasped hands, looking away into the further recesses of the little room.

"It's like this, Frances," he began. "The city's a queer place. You come across all sorts of people. For instance, in a coffeehouse where I go to play draughts sometimes, or dominoes, for half an hour after lunch—now and again I take one or two of the smaller customers with me—there's a funny old man I've known by sight for years. Lately, he's begun to talk. I'm not sure that he is English. He talks all right, but he hesitates for a word occasionally. He surprised me the other day by asking where was the young lady I used to bring to dinner at the Pomme d'Or. I told him I hadn't been seeing so much of you, and he laughed at me. 'More fool you!' he said. 'There's a young lady, who, if she chose, could make your fortune.' "

"I make your fortune!" Frances repeated wonderingly.

"That's how he begun. Of course I asked him what he meant and at first he wouldn't tell me. When he did—well, I was fairly taken aback, Frances, to think that he should know all the things he did. He knew your name and he knew the names of every one for whom you'd worked. He knew that you were the only woman secretary admitted to the Conference. He even knew—and that's more than I did—what the nature of your work was there."

"What is it?" she asked incredulously.

"You take shorthand notes of the whole proceedings," he replied. "When the day's session is over you type them out in three copies. One is passed over to the Foreign Office for filing; one is given to Lord Idrington, and another is put away in a private cabinet somewhere, and will be the one from which the reports are drawn up and eventually handed over to the Press."

She looked up into his face in blank amazement.

"But who is this remarkable friend of yours?" she demanded.

"Is he right?"

"Very nearly."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know who he is," Howlett admitted. "I could make a pretty good guess, of course, but I don't know if I want to. Anyway, he knows things, doesn't he?"

"He certainly does," Frances acknowledged. "More than is good for him, I should think."

"A few days ago," Sidney Howlett continued, "he spread himself. That's what he did—he spread himself. He asked me to dine with him at Frascati's and he made me a proposition. Now, take this quietly, Frances. We're ordinary human beings, you and I, and we've got to live like other people and money ain't too easy to get. It's just having a bit of money that makes us able to do things or not to do them. Take it easy!"

"I am prepared for anything," she assured him.

"You use clean carbons, of course, all the time. He wants you to use a fresh one for each page you put in your typewriter and from now on he'll buy the carbons. As he points out, there's no risk in that. Used carbons are worthless things. He's not asking you to sell a copy of your work. He's asking just for those used carbons from now until the end of the Conference, and he'll give us—listen, Frances—ten thousand pounds for them."

She sat quite still, stunned for a moment, unable to analyse her own sensations, to feel anything clearly. Out of the confusion of her mind she ventured an almost automatic question.

"But what on earth could he do with them?"

"He has a machine—he or his friend, or whoever it is behind him," Sidney Howlett explained—"that applies

great pressure or something of the sort, on to a peculiar paper, and which can bring back the impression of anything. It was a French discovery a few years ago."

Frances relapsed once more into silence. Once before, during the war, when she had been secretary to a famous man, something of this sort had occurred to her—an offer of a pearl necklace for a copy of a single letter, inspired by a fantastic journalist of a paper in bad repute with her Chief. She remembered the volcano of scorn she had poured out, her almost tigress-like attack upon the man. There was nothing of this in her veins now. She simply felt numbed.

"Ten thousand pounds," he went on, gaining confidence by her speechlessness, "is what I call absolute and luxurious security. We will buy a house and either a small car or a motor cycle and side car. Then we invest say seven or eight thousand and we know that whatever happens we have a nice little income there and we can afford to face anything. I go ahead with my work cheerfully and you can have a servant and live like a lady, do just as much as you want to, and if you want to keep on with your job and come up with me in the morning and back at night for a time, why, there's nothing to stop it—not at first. I hope there would be later."

"Don't, Sidney," she begged. "I can't bear it for a moment. Do you mind just letting me think."

He threw away the extinguished cigar he had been holding and lit a cigarette. She sat there at his feet, her eyes wide open, her hands clasped, and thought in the little room where she had woven so many sad dreams, in which she had gone so often weeping to bed, the room where those grey waves of tragic loneliness had first broken over her, had become continually her horrible visitants, had threatened almost to engulf her. She re-

membered a night not so long ago when she had vowed herself to sin or to crime or to any form of ill doing to escape from the black thing she feared. Now the chance had come—brought by the man she half despised, half unworthily loved—come with the pictures of the little house, the babies, the fuller, simpler, absurd life ridiculous Nature had made the best. Suddenly she sprang up, a sense of stifling at her throat, and pushed open the window. Across the way the wet leaves of a tall grove of elm trees were rustling together, rain was still visible, falling round the lamp-posts, the policeman's cape below shone in the reflected light. Her temples were throbbing, but as she stood there her brain seemed to clear. Curiously enough, all her indignation had gone. Perhaps she felt it would have been wasted upon the young man who sat there waiting for her answer.

"Do you know who your friend's employers are, Sidney?" she asked him.

"Not on your life," was the prompt reply. "I don't know that I want to particularly."

"Every nation of account in Europe to-day," she continued, "is represented at the Conference. To whom then could information be of this importance? Who is there not represented?"

"Ask me another," he demanded. "To me it's a looney business, but I don't mind telling you that when I said so to our friend he passed me across a hundred of the best to show that he was in earnest. Fifty will be yours to-night, Frances, if you come across."

"One of the American attachés," she reflected, "has already been sent away in disgrace for imparting information."

"You don't run any risk," he pointed out eagerly. "No one would ever dream of the carbons being worth anything."

"I'm not thinking of my personal risk," she answered. "I'm wondering how much harm this might do."

"What's the good of worrying about that?" he argued. "I tell you this world was never built for those who are always thinking about other people. It is a world of egoists, it is a world where unless you push for yourself no one else is going to see about it for you. You and I have got our chance, Frances. It's up to us to take it."

"How do you know that your friend will keep his word?" she asked. "Ten thousand pounds is a great deal of money."

"He'll pay five thousand down with the first sheets of carbon I send him—to-morrow's, if we start to-morrow; the other five thousand pounds the day the Conference closes. I tell you what I'll do," he went on eagerly, "I'll prove I mean to play fair. You shall hold the whole of the first five thousand. I'll pass them over to you directly I get them, and we'll go and look at houses next week. We'll spend nothing except on our joint account. How's that?"

"It seems fair," she admitted.

She closed the window and returned to his side.

"Supposing I decide, Sidney," she began—

"I meet you when you come out to-morrow," he interrupted. "You just hand me over the carbons when we get into a safe place, and that's all there is to it. We'll meet somewhere for supper, if you like, and I'll give you the five thousand. I'd take you down to the city and you could see the man for yourself, but I think you're best out of it."

She sighed.

"Very well," she decided, "you can meet me anyhow. I may change my mind, but I don't think I shall."

He passed his arm round her waist. Their lips met.

She took his kisses quietly at first; then, with almost a note of passion, she kissed him back again and drew gently away. Hopelessly commonplace though he was, he had wit enough to appreciate the wonderful things in her eyes.

"You're fond of me still, Frances?" he asked, a little breathlessly.

"Yes, dear," she said, leading him to the door. "I'm fond of you and I'm fonder still of the things you represent, and I hate more than anything on earth or in hell what you may save me from."

She listened to his steps descending the stone stairs; firm, heavy steps, not too buoyant but with a man's weight. Then she turned back and locked the door.

CHAPTER XXII

The concluding stages of the Great International Conference, although actually free enough from incident, were marked by a period of strain. From the first, the proceedings had been admirably conducted, the accumulation of evidence as to Germany's financial and economic condition adroitly handled and discussed with inevitable force and directness. The two chief German witnesses—Baron von Hustein and Herr Felderling—skilful diplomatists though they were, found themselves faced with an impossible task. They were continually driven to deny existing facts and an existing situation, only to be confronted with indubitable and unexpected proofs of their actual existence. In this keen and logical atmosphere with their final pledges already given before the opening of the meeting, their old policy of disputing everything, denying everything, and finally attempting grudgingly to bargain, were methods suited neither to the environment nor the conditions of the place. Time after time they were obliged to withdraw statements and abandon a position which they had taken up with truculence and decision.

Lord Idrington, the English Chairman, showed them even more than full measure of consideration, but as the Conference drew towards its final stages there was not one person who had followed the evidence who did not realise that the time of Germany's evasions had passed. She was pledged to pay according to the decision of the Conference, and the Conference could come to no other

conclusion than that she was in a position to pay and pay generously. Even Felderling himself, the pessimist of the two, finally abandoned his legend of a Germany devastated by the Ruhr, torn by international schisms, bankrupt not alone on paper but in the actual daily life of her people. Already, notwithstanding the pledge of secrecy given and renewed each day by the members of the Conference itself, notwithstanding the heaviest imposition of silence laid upon the few subordinates admitted to the hearings, rumours of the end to which the Conference was tending seemed to leak out in some mysterious, unanalysable fashion. The bourses of every capital in Europe showed signs of inflation. Yet the Press was silent.

On the evening after Frances' meeting with Sidney Howlett, she was seated in the little office allotted to her use, typing busily. There were three piles of finished sheets on her right, on her left a neatly arranged stack of carbons. At the sound of a knocking on the door her hand involuntarily stole out towards these.

"Can I come in for a minute?" Mark enquired.

"Of course," she answered. "Have you finished?"

He nodded.

"I hadn't any actual transcription to do to-day," he reminded her. "I only had to put my papers in order and get the minutes for to-morrow. I thought you might like a cigarette and perhaps I could drive you home."

She shook her head regretfully.

"You are very kind," she told him, "but I have almost another half-hour's work, and afterwards I expect I shall be met."

She accepted a cigarette and leaned back in her chair for a moment with a little gesture of weariness. He stood by her side, looking through the uncurtained window across the house tops.

"That sounds more cheerful than going home alone in the rain," he remarked. "Does it mean—?"

"The result of my desperate mood last time we talked," she interrupted. "It is a terrible experiment, isn't it? I'm going to marry the young man I pointed out to you."

"The best of luck!" Mark exclaimed, with a heartiness in his tone which was obviously a little forced. "I hope it will be all right, Miss Moreland. Sure he's good enough for you and that sort of thing?"

"He is a man," she answered, "and he wants a home. I am a woman and I am aching for one. I suppose that's where we will come together and escape a good deal of friction."

"Is it enough?" he asked gravely.

"God knows!" she replied. "As a rule we talk too much of these things beforehand. All that is to be known we find out afterwards."

He looked around at the neat piles of her work; sheet after sheet spotless and without a single correction.

"Wonderful person, aren't you?" he exclaimed. "Tell me, why do you keep all your old carbons together?"

She closed the drawer.

"Just an idea," she replied. "Carbons are not so good nowadays and I use a great many more."

"Well, good luck!" he wished her, as he took his leave. "Ask me to the wedding."

Mark was afflicted with a peculiar restlessness that afternoon. He drove first to Curzon Street and looked eagerly through the letters and cards which were waiting. Estelle had promised to telephone or write him as soon as she was free, but up till now there had been no word from her. He made his way back to Marsden House, attended to a couple of letters in his room, and

afterwards mounted the broad staircase into the drawing-room. He paid his respects to Mrs. Huventhayer and half a dozen callers and was drawn into a corner by Myra.

"What a blessed relief," she sighed. "I am being asphyxiated in an atmosphere of conventionality. Every one saying the proper thing once or twice over!"

"Let's go round to Claridge's and dance for an hour," he suggested.

She rose softly to her feet with the air of a conspirator.

"Wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Am I looking too excited? Don't say good-bye to any one. Wait downstairs in the hall whilst I put on a hat and change my shoes. I shan't be five minutes."

She was down in almost less than that time, wrapped in most becoming furs, her pleasant freckled face alive with animation. She sank into the seat by his side with a little exclamation of pleasure. Inside the wonderfully cushioned coupé everything was luxuriously comfortable. Outside in the streets there was a driving rain, a cold wind and a lowering sky. There were few pedestrians, but a great block of vehicles in Piccadilly. They threaded their way slowly as far as Clarges Street, then shot round and reached Claridge's by skirting Berkeley Square. A few minutes later they were dancing in the crowded lounge. They talked of indifferent things. Myra had just received an invitation to go out to Cannes, and was hesitating.

"Of course one would love to see the sun," she confessed, "and to get some tennis out of doors, but London, for all its gloom, is terribly attractive. I wonder you aren't down there, though, Mark, for the polo."

"I should have been," he told her. "I took my stables and, in fact, some of my ponies are there now, but this

offer came along from your father, and naturally I was very glad to take it. I've been idle long enough."

"To be idle gracefully," she remarked, "is an art which, as a rule, I don't think we Americans possess. An Englishman's best at it. He always seems aggrieved when he has to work."

"Henry Dorchester is an exception," Mark reminded her. "He takes to work like a duck does to water. English politics beat me, though. I have been down to the House once or twice in the evenings, and I can't see how they ever get anywhere. They talk and talk—"

He broke off suddenly. Myra, glancing over his shoulder to see the reason, found herself looking into Estelle's smiling face. She was dancing with Dorchester and as though by design the latter whirled her away at once to the other end of the room.

"Just as I was giving the fellow a pat on the back for being a real hard worker," Mark observed, "here he is at a *Thé Dansant* and the business of the country going on anyhow."

"But he doesn't often do it," Myra declared. "At least I've never seen him here before in the afternoons. I have invited him two or three times to parties and his replies have been most superior—'Regrets that his parliamentary duties, etc.' However, I suppose he's really like all the rest of you—more or less in love with Estelle Dukane. It must be wonderful to be as beautiful as that and to be the richest young woman in Europe. Shall we stop for a moment? I'm not really tired but there will be another fox trot soon and I'm dying for an orangeade."

They sat at a small round table, chatting now and then to passers-by and exchanging a few remarks themselves. Occasionally Mark glanced restlessly at the main exit from the dancing room, through which presently Estelle

and Dorchester appeared. Myra put out her hand and stopped Estelle.

"When can we come and see you at Cruton House?" she enquired. "Is it this week or next that you are moving in?"

"Next Monday," Estelle answered. "Please come the first day you can after that."

"Got to go back to the House," Dorchester explained, glancing at his watch. "I'm just taking Miss Dukane as far as the lift."

"Don't go up yet," Myra invited. "Stay with us."

Mark promptly offered her his chair, and Estelle sat down. She and Myra began to talk and Dorchester took his leave. Mark, in search of another chair, found Rangle, one of the junior attachés at the Embassy, and brought him along.

"Wait until I've finished my orangeade," Myra begged, "then I'm going to dance with Mr. Rangle. He's quite one of my best pupils, aren't you, Charlie? One thing I insist on, Mark, though: you must take me home. I'll dance with Charlie willingly but I wouldn't trust myself to his driving on a night like this for anything.

"She is a nice girl, your friend, Miss Myra," Estelle remarked, as they followed the others into the dancing room. "Is she fond of you?"

"Of course not," he answered. "I explained to you before what pals we had always been. If she has a fancy for any one I think it is for Dorchester. If you wanted to dance, why didn't you let me know?"

She leaned a little away and laughed into his face.

"Absurd! Why should I? And besides, I never thought of dancing this afternoon. Lord Dorchester brought his mother and sister to call."

"I thought you weren't receiving here," he grumbled.

"Nor are we," she assured him. "Unfortunately, I

descended by the lift whilst they were handing in their cards. What was one to do? We all had tea and afterwards the Duchess and Lady Mary went on to pay some more calls and Lord Dorchester stayed for a couple of dances."

"It sounds reasonable," he conceded, with a slight access of good humour.

"I think," she declared, "that you are spoilt. Do all these young women spoil you, Mr. Van Stratton, because you are big and yet dance rather well?"

"The only person I care a cent about doesn't spoil me," he assured her with some signs of relapse into his former gloom.

She smiled.

"Then be thankful for it. To be spoilt is bad for the disposition. Where do you dine to-night?"

"Nowhere, if there's a chance of dining with you," he answered eagerly.

"Quite the correct reply," she admitted, "but to-night it would not be possible. The reason I asked is because my father wanted to know a short time ago where you were to be found. He has rung you up at your house and at the Embassy."

"What can we do about it?" Mark enquired.

They were near the door and she stopped dancing.

"I will telephone up to the rooms," she proposed. "I will tell him that you cannot go and see him now as you have a young lady to take home. I will hint, if you wish, that you are disengaged for dinner. I know that we are dining alone."

"Do," he begged.

The telephone conversation was short. They were dancing again in less than two minutes.

"You are to be here at nine o'clock," she announced. "We will probably dine upstairs in the sitting room."

"I don't care where we dine," he answered, a little recklessly, "but I must talk to your father seriously about marrying you."

"Do," she begged. "I think, after we have had dinner, if you do not mind. I saw my father in a temper once. He broke nearly everything in the room and the man who angered him went to hospital for a month. Besides, as I told you, I have almost made up my mind to marry Prince Andropulo as soon as he becomes King of Drome."

"Pretty rotten choice," he declared emphatically.

"My father would not agree with you," she said. "He is very anxious indeed to develop the resources of Drome. He says that no one has ever attempted to run the affairs of a kingdom on business lines, and he believes that he could do wonderful things."

They stopped dancing. Myra and her partner were approaching.

"You haven't a sister, by any chance, have you?" he asked.

"You know I haven't," she replied.

"Then your father's chances of having a king for a son-in-law," he whispered, as the little party said their farewells, "amount to a little less than nil."

CHAPTER XXIII

That night Mark realised the truth of some of the stories current as to the difficulty of obtaining an interview with the great man of finance. Although he announced himself as having been invited to dine he was kept waiting in the hall nearly ten minutes before a dark, bald-headed young man, who had been pointed out to him once as Mr. Dukane's private secretary, descended by the lift and introduced himself.

"You are Mr. Van Stratton?" he enquired.

"That is my name," Mark replied.

"I am Mr. Dukane's secretary. He is expecting you to dinner, I believe. Will you allow me to show you the way to his suite."

Mark followed the young man into the lift and they ascended to the third floor in silence. A servant was handing cocktails to Mr. Dukane and Estelle as they entered the reception room.

"Mr. Van Stratton," the secretary announced.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Van Stratton," Dukane said, holding out his hand; a speech which from him was a distinct effort at graciousness. Estelle contented herself with a little smile and nod.

"I hope I do not need to apologise to you," his host continued, as they passed through the drawn curtains into the room beyond, "for asking you to dine in private. I find the Press of this country almost as bad as the Press of America in seeking interviews and chronicling the doings of anybody whom they think of the slightest

public interest. Even at Mario's, when you were paying your bill, the wine waiter asked me what I thought of French *rentes* for a rise. This class of person is insatiable. They batten all the time on the idea that they may get a little free information."

"Then your friends, too, become troublesome sometimes, I suppose," Mark suggested—"your acquaintances, at any rate."

Felix Dukane groaned.

"Where money is concerned," he declared, as they took their places at the small round table lavishly decorated with flowers, "it is a shameless age. People whom one meets everywhere will risk a snub, will risk anything for the chance of a word of information, which will bring them in a little money. Why they should persist, I do not know. They say that we who have wealth overestimate its importance. How can we help it when we see human beings in every walk of life willing to lose their self-respect for the chance of a word thrown to them like a bone."

"My manicurist confided to me to-day," Estelle said, "that she had fifty pounds saved, and if she knew exactly how to invest it so that it brought in another fifty pounds in about a month or two months' time she would be able to get married."

"Just about as sensible as the rest of them," her father grumbled. "Of course I can make any of the gilt-edged securities rise or fall if I want to, but it is very seldom worth one's while. The financial public of this country as a rule have common sense. Now can you guess why I sent for you, Mr. Van Stratton?"

Mark was a little startled by the abrupt change in the conversation.

"I can't think of any special reason, sir," he acknowledged.

"That fellow Brennan," Mr. Dukane confided, with a ferocious light in his eyes, and something which was almost a snarl in his tone, "when I got to your rooms punctually at the time we had appointed—he had levanted."

"You mean to say that you didn't bring off your deal with him, after all?" Mark exclaimed.

"I did not," Mr. Dukane confessed. "Your servants told me that he had asked for a taxi at eight o'clock and driven off."

Mark whistled softly.

"Why, I thought you had him scared stiff!" he exclaimed.

"I thought so too. Brennan's no fool, though. He knows very well that if I informed against him I should lose my last chance of getting those papers. So he decided to call my bluff."

"And you haven't any idea where he has gone to?" Mark asked.

Mr. Dukane sipped his champagne, with the flavour of which he seemed satisfied.

"I had all the ratholes stopped in a couple of hours," he said. "I had to disobey my friend, the Chief Commissioner at Scotland Yard, but I couldn't afford to let this fellow disappear. I not only know where he is but I know what he does from hour to hour. He is living in rooms in a little street called Rectory Row in Hampstead, and he is losing his nerve just about as rapidly as a man may. Every now and then he rings up for a taxi. As soon as it appears there is another a little way behind and a passer-by in the act of entering. Mr. Brennan pays his shilling or eighteen pence and hurries back to the house. He is like a scared rabbit who dares not come out of his hole."

"Are you going to leave him there?"

The underlip shot out; a sign that Felix Dukane was confronted with a problem.

"That depends," he said curtly.

The servants entered the room with the final course of their dinner—asparagus brought by aëroplane from the south of France. Mark permitted himself to talk with Estelle.

"Are you looking forward to your duties as hostess of half London?" he asked her.

"Without much enthusiasm," she admitted. "I am to share them, however. My godmother, the Princess Rospignolli, is coming to help. It is unfortunate for me because we are the same style and she always collects my admirers."

"Is it necessary for me to swear fidelity?" he enquired.

"No, I think I can count upon you," she said coolly. "I'm not at all sure about Lord Dorchester. I think he rather admires your pleasant-looking, freckled companion of this afternoon. I am beginning to believe that all these nice, earnest young men are fickle. Father, should I be allowed to marry into the British peerage?"

"You won't be allowed to marry any one if I can help it," was the curt reply—"certainly not an Englishman."

"What about an American?" Mark asked hopefully.

"Rubbish!" Mr. Dukane scoffed. "However, I waste breath. Serve coffee and brandy," he directed one of the servants.

Estelle lit a cigarette and pouted.

"For a young girl of a romantic disposition," she observed, "you can understand, Mr. Mark Van Stratton, that I at times find my father something of a trial. I promise you one thing, though," she added, patting her father's hand for a moment, "I am not going to be an old maid."

He looked at her for a moment through his narrowed eyes. His bushy eyebrows seemed to become more prominent, his jaw more stubborn. Watching him closely, however, Mark wondered whether something of the hardness had not for the moment left his expression.

"In six months from now," he promised, "I will talk to you about a husband. That will be time enough."

"Brute!" Estelle murmured, under her breath. "And the first day of spring next week! Father, you are really very inconsiderate. I believe that Mr. Van Stratton would like to marry me."

Mr. Dukane became absolutely menacing. He frowned heavily and struck the table with his clenched fist.

"You irritate me when you persist in talking nonsense, Estelle," he declared.

Estelle sighed and helped herself to coffee. His host turned to Mark.

"Mr. Van Stratton," he said, a little grudgingly, "I am told that I have to thank you for your intervention on my daughter's behalf yesterday."

"It was very little I was able to do," Mark observed.

"Nevertheless, you saved the situation. The papers themselves were not of such great importance as I had imagined, but it is necessary that I am kept *au courant* with the affairs of the Conference, whatever means I have to employ. In case you have any qualms of conscience because of your interference, let me assure you of this: it is for the good of the Conference and for its success that I am working."

"I am glad to hear that, sir," Mark acknowledged.

"So, far," Mr. Dukane continued, "with considerable difficulty and by means of methods which have brought me into ill odour with the authorities here, I have contrived to keep in touch with the proceedings. They appear to me to have been conducted sagely and in a

generous spirit. If the end is reached in the same way, what seemed impossible will be achieved—Europe will be recreated. There is but one event which could bring failure—if not complete failure, at least comparative failure—upon the whole proceeding. That is, if this fellow Brennan ventures out of his hiding place and obtains the ear of the Conference before they issue their report."

"As bad an upset as that?" Mark ventured.

"Absolutely," was the decisive reply. "Brennan can wreck the Conference and he is the only man alive who can. I shall never regret sufficiently that I did not strike a little harder when the chance was there. I would kill him at this moment as I would a poisonous fly. He is a traitor to his country as well as to his own interests. He has one idea and one idea only in his mind—to be revenged on me. The present situation is in a sense ridiculous. I have tracked him down. I know where he is, but I can't strike. The police here are indifferent enough, but they have intelligence of a sort. I am watching Brennan. They are watching me and my men. They know they are my men too. Two or three of them would be willing to take a big risk for the sake of a fortune, but unfortunately I am known to be in the background. If Brennan hadn't apparently lost his nerve he could walk out of the house in Rectory Row to-night, and with my men on either side of him could take his taxi to Chancery Lane, use his key and launch his accursed thunderbolt. I couldn't stop him. My men couldn't stop him. They could only let me know that he had done it. So far, he doesn't seem to realise the strength of his position. He probably doesn't know that my men in their turn are being watched. At any moment, though, he may stumble upon the truth. Then there's another danger: your

friend De Fontanay has a young woman over here—Mademoiselle Zona Latriche—of whom he sometimes makes very effectual use. She is there at the present moment with Brennan. The French are the only people in the world—as you have, I suppose, thought out for yourself before now, my young friend—to whom this Conference some day or other will spell disaster. De Fontanay, if he does not know the whole truth, is shrewd enough to divine a portion of it. The girl is there with Brennan, working for De Fontanay. Brennan wouldn't see me, and my men are all known. I want you to go down and try what you can do."

Mark shook his head doubtfully.

"I had a very narrow shave with my Chief for interfering on your daughter's behalf yesterday," he said. "Nothing in the world would give me more pleasure than to be of service to you in any way, but I honestly don't think I ought to be your ambassador, or go near Brennan at all, for that matter."

"You are going to see him to-night on your own behalf," Dukane insisted. "You are a patriotic young American. It has come to your knowledge—and I assure you on my word of honour this is the truth—that Brennan is in possession of information which, if made improper use of, might break up the Conference, nullify its labours, and plunge Europe into worse distress than ever before. Therefore you are more than justified in trying to make a deal with Brennan on your own account. Pay him any reasonable sum. Don't bring the papers to me, though. Keep them locked up where you will, and I promise that you shall be no loser by the transaction. Stop Brennan's papers coming on to the table at the Conference or falling into the hands of De Fontanay, and you will render a great and signal service to the cause of peace."

Estelle leaned across the table.

"Please go," she begged. "It may make all the difference."

"I will see you through, if there's any trouble with your Chief," Dukane promised. "I am dining at Buckingham Palace on Monday, and he is to be of the party; and with the Prime Minister next week; and the Chancellor of the Exchequer is giving a luncheon to us on the Monday afterwards at the Ritz. They know very well that it is I who can clear this mess up, and if ever your action becomes known I will justify it."

"Please go," Estelle begged once more. "If you go quickly you may be able to come back and make your report and there will be time to go downstairs and have one dance. You must do this for me."

Mark rose to his feet.

"I'll try, sir," he promised. "It is understood, though, that I am acting entirely on my own behalf."

Dukane nodded.

"Best so," he agreed. "Remember, of course, that if you need money there's no limit to your credit with me. Seven, Rectory Row, off St. John's Wood Road. My car is downstairs waiting and the chauffeur knows the address."

Estelle sprang up and walked to the door with her hand through his arm.

"This I shall not forget," she told him softly. "Good luck!"

CHAPTER XXIV

From the moment of Mark's entrance into the shabby little sitting room—it had cost him a sovereign tip to a very dishevelled serving maid and a somewhat heated argument with the landlady—he knew that Brennan was drunk. He felt, too, that his arrival had been opportune, for by his side on the couch, with her head gently resting upon his shoulder, sat Mademoiselle Zona Latriche. Upon the table were the remains of a meal, and two empty champagne bottles, some coffee cups, a bottle of brandy and a box of cigarettes. Brennan blinked at his unexpected visitor, for the moment bewildered. The girl's big eyes were filled with angry apprehension.

"Goliath!" Brennan exclaimed, with clumsy gravity. "Mr. Goliath! Friend of mine, Mademoiselle Zona. Sit down and have a drink."

"Who is this gentleman?" Mademoiselle demanded. "Why is he here?"

"Friend of mine," Brennan declared. "All friends of mine. All want the same thing. Don't want me. I know. Good friend of mine this, though. Saved my life. Might have left me out in Richmond Park. Good fellow! Ring for a clean glass."

"What do you want with Mr. Brennan?" Mademoiselle asked suspiciously. "He is not well. He should not see visitors. I am here to look after him."

"He seems all right," Mark said good-humouredly. "I hope I'm not butting in. I won't stay long."

The landlady entered with a tray of glasses.

"That's right," Brennan approved, speaking a little slower than usual, and with great distinctness. "Nothing more, thank you, Mrs. Harrison. We have plenty more wine in the corner. So you found me out, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"Ah, that is your name," the girl murmured. "It seems that I have heard of you."

"That is my name," Mark acknowledged, "and I have also heard of you, Mademoiselle Zona Latriche."

"Good things, I trust?" she asked. "And yet, what do I care? What do you want of my friend, Mr. Brennan?"

"Well," Mark replied, "when Mr Brennan asks me, I daresay I shall be able to tell him. Just at present I am drinking his very excellent wine."

"And quite right too," Brennan muttered. "Friend of mine, Zona, I told you that."

"He may be a friend of yours, but he wants something," the girl observed, with a flash of her dark eyes.

Brennan laughed until his long mouth seemed like a gash in his face and his little red eyes almost disappeared.

"Yes, he wants something. You all want something. It is amazing! Number Seven Rectory Row! Not a very wonderful address—not a very wonderful neighbourhood—and I sit here, ready if I choose, to push my spoke into the wheels of the world. What a crash!"

"As you are in such a candid frame of mind," Mark suggested, "why not tell us all about it? Tell us what you are going to do?"

Mademoiselle lifted her head from her companion's shoulder and sat upright.

"Why should he tell you anything?" she demanded. "It is I who am his friend. It is I who know what he will do. You others waste your time."

Brennan sipped his wine gravely, utterly regardless of the fact that he spilt a great deal more than he drank.

"Funny place, this!" he declared. "Seven Rectory Row! At one corner of the street—man waiting. Opposite—another man waiting. A little farther away—English detective watching men who wait. Inside, me—poor me!—with Mademoiselle Zona Latriche and the great Mr. Van Stratton of the American Embassy, a friend of Felix Dukane. Mademoiselle Zona I love very much, but if she thinks I do not know, she is foolish. She is paid to come here. She is paid by the Marquis de Fontanay."

"Imbecile!" she cried indignantly. "I know nothing of what you speak. If you insult me, I leave."

He suddenly caught hold of her fingers which were feeling his arm.

"Do not disurb yourself, little one," he begged. "I will set your mind at ease. I still wear the iron bracelet. As to whether you could open it if you reached it, as to whether the key is still there—ah, well, of that we will not speak. There is also Mr. Van Stratton, interested in the same matter."

"I perceive," Mark observed, "that you have no secrets from Mademoiselle."

"Indeed, why should he?" Mademoiselle murmured, her head resting once more upon her companion's shoulder. "I love him. We are one."

"That simplifies matters," Mark declared. "If you are one you would naturally like to share a large sum of money. Mine is a business visit, Brennan. You have something which, if you are a wise man, you will sell. I'd like to buy it—to buy it, mark you, for myself, on my own account."

"You hear that," Brennan said, turning to Zona.

"That is young America who speaks. It is not diplomacy, but it is business. He would like to buy.

"But you would not sell," she whispered, with her lips close to his. "You would not sell what is promised to me."

The words seemed to arouse in Brennan one of those fits of incoherent anger, slow and unreasonable, which come with partial drunkenness.

"Promised?"

He pushed her away and regarded her severely.

"I have promised nothing," he continued. "Because I let you come here and let you pretend to be my dearest friend, and whisper about a million francs between us—what are a million francs?—you think that all is easy. You are wrong, my Zona—wrong! I have promised nothing."

For a moment it seemed as though Mademoiselle Zona was about to revert to type. Her eyes blazed, her mouth was like the mouth of a tigress. Even Brennan, watching her with sullen gravity, drew a little away. Then she remembered that absolute failure in her enterprise was a certainty if she yielded for one moment to the passion of mingled disgust and anger which had flamed up in her heart. Her effort at self-control was amazing She sat quite still. Then she began to cry.

"You do not love me," she sobbed. "All you have said is false."

Brennan showed signs of attempting some maudlin form of consolation. Mark, however, intervened.

"Look here, Brennan," he said, "you've been drinking a little too much, but after all you're a sensible man. For what purpose did you risk your life in getting together this information? What did you do it for?"

"Power," was the prompt reply. "I did it to gain power. And I have it. I can break four of the greatest

men of Germany—break them one by one. And this Conference—well, I can destroy the very bases upon which they would arrive at their decision. It is I who have this power. I, who sit in this shabby parlour of Number Seven, Rectory Row, with spies and police outside and you two cajoling inside. The quarters are bad but the wine is good."

"You have drunk quite enough of it," Mark told him bluntly. "We have talked enough too. Let's get to business."

"Unfortunately," Brennan sighed, "I am not sober."

"You are sober enough to realise that I am offering you a million dollars, not a million francs, for the information you have to sell. You can be a rich man in any city of the world, even in America. Why not take the money and get rid of us? There may be others who will try other methods."

"You hear him?" Brennan observed, turning to Zona. "It is the new world which speaks. Sound, full of common sense! A million dollars! That is equal to fifteen million francs. It seems to me that this is the man with whom I must deal."

Again there was the flame in her eyes and for a single moment Mark expected to see her strike him. Instead she folded her arms round his neck and drew his head down to hers. So they stayed for several moments, whispering. Mark lit a cigarette and walked up and down the shabby little room. Its atmosphere sickened him. He was praying only for escape. Brennan appeared to have sunk into a state of comatose indecision. Mark paused upon the hearthrug and looked down at him, frowning.

"Shall I write my cheque, Brennan?" he asked.

Brennan thrust away the entwining arms and sat up.

"A gentleman," he said, speaking slowly and with great distinctness, "never attempts to do business with another

gentleman except when both are perfectly sober. Am I perfectly sober?"

"Sober enough for the purpose," Mark rejoined impatiently.

"That is where you are wrong, my young friend," Brennan insisted. "If I were perfectly sober I should not permit this young lady's embraces in public. I should not allow her, as I have done for the last few hours, to continually feel up and down my sleeve and make furtive attempts to open my bracelet. No, Mr. Van Stratton, I am not perfectly sober. I like you. I think, since you assure me that you are buying on your own account, you are the man with whom I shall do business, but it shall be to-morrow, not to-day. You shall hear from me. I promise you that. In the meantime, I will put your mind at ease. Until we meet, what I have I will hold. Even Mademoiselle and I will talk no more of business. We will open another bottle of wine and we will drink. Have no fear, Mr. Van Stratton. To-morrow I shall be sober. My respects to the little crowd outside. You may tell them, if you will, that I am not moving to-night. I am very comfortable here—plenty more wine to finish. And listen, I will be more definite. The day of the week is Tuesday. A week from to-day I will give you an appointment. You shall come and see me once more. Then you shall know whether I deal with you or not."

He began to doze. Van Stratton moved towards the door. Mademoiselle rose to her feet and walked by his side.

"But for you," she whispered reproachfully, "I should have had what I wanted of him by now."

"Seems to me your chance is a pretty good one as it is," Mark replied, glancing back at Brennan stretched in his chair, his mouth open, his eyes closed.

A little exclamation of disgust broke from Mademoiselle's lips.

"He is too cunning," she exclaimed. "Even if I could find the secret spring of his bracelet, I do not believe that the key is there. He has found another hiding place. If I felt sure that it was there, I think that I should take any risk."

Mark shook his head.

"Better be careful," he advised her.

They stood together upon the threshold, looking out into the darkness of the wet, stormy night. They both felt the relief of the fresh air after the stuffiness of the little room. Mademoiselle Zona's fingers for a moment rested upon Mark's arm.

"The great things of the world," she said, as she turned away, "are not won by being careful."

CHAPTER XXV

THERE was perhaps some slight and unfamiliar sense of strain in those first few minutes of the coming together of the three friends, a lack of the usual heartiness in their exchange of greetings. Both Mark and De Fontanay showed signs of the anxieties of the last few weeks. Even Dorchester had lost some of his healthy colour, and there were lines of added seriousness at the corners of his mouth. It was De Fontanay, as usual, who restored the situation. As he stood sipping his cocktail he hummed very softly, almost under his breath, the little French marching air which only a few years ago had thrilled the hearts of thousands. Dorchester listened for a moment and smiled reminiscently. The old light shone in Mark's eyes.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Do you remember that morning, Raoul, when you were trying to get the remains of your Cuirassiers across the ridge to the rest camp, and Henry was using the foulest language I ever heard trying to get one of his pop guns out of a ditch—"

"And swoop you came down right amongst us," Dorchester interposed, "with a broken wing on your plane. We all thought you'd got it in the neck, and all you did was to take off that ghastly helmet of yours and ask for a drink."

"It was a wonderful meeting," De Fontanay reflected.

"And so is this," Dorchester declared. "So are all our reunions. We're sticking it out all right too. We've

all been faced with incidents lately. They don't matter. There were incidents then—little jealousies—sometimes almost a misunderstanding. We lived through them."

They obeyed the summons of the *maître d'hôtel* and moved on towards the restaurant, De Fontanay in the middle.

"My dear friends," he said, "after all, it is easily understood—this little cloud which at times depresses us. You see, in those days we had only one thought, one common aim. To-day somehow things have become different. It is harder for us, for instance, to live through the peace than the war because however one looks at it we three know that the Conference upon which the eyes of the world are fixed just now may bring great prosperity to your two countries, but will fix upon ours the shadow of a great tragedy."

"Don't you believe it," Mark insisted. "The whole world is scarey about treaties just now, but no one has any idea of leaving France alone."

De Fontanay smiled a little sadly.

"The kindly feeling is there without a doubt," he admitted. "Now let us be less serious. We will leave politics alone and pass to personal affairs. How goes the deadly rivalry?"

"I have made some slight progress," Dorchester confessed, sipping his wine approvingly. "Nothing definite, though."

"Same here," Mark acknowledged. "I can't say I like this new move of entertaining half London. It opens the field to too many runners. Henry and I will probably drop behind a bit to-night."

"Of course we are all going?" De Fontanay enquired.

"Who isn't?" Mark rejoined gloomily. "There have been a thousand invitations issued. I called the other afternoon and found a string of automobiles the whole

of the way down Curzon Street, and cards falling like snowflakes."

"When the richest man in the world," De Fontanay observed—"a man too with a reputable past and a beautiful daughter—suddenly makes up his mind to entertain in the middle of a rather dull season, why, he is likely to create something of a sensation. In Paris his progress would be slower but none the less inevitable. You know, of course, that Mademoiselle was presented at last night's Court?"

"I was there," Mark acknowledged gloomily. "I couldn't get anywhere near her, though."

"You will have to accustom yourself to that," De Fontanay remarked. "I am fortunately apart from you two in your adoration of the young lady, but I prophesy a great success for her this season. Within a week her picture will be in half the illustrated papers. She will be interviewed in the society journals and beauty specialists will be praying for a single word about that really wonderful complexion of hers. I warn you that you two are in for an uncomfortable time. Personally I think it serves you both right."

"You're making yourself devilishly unpleasant, Raoul," Dorchester grumbled. "Why does it serve us right?"

"Because," De Fontanay pointed out drily, "both of you, notwithstanding the fact that you are young men of intelligence and parts, have been foolish enough to lose your heads and pledge yourselves to the pursuit of a young woman concerning whom you know nothing except that in her Dresden-doll sort of fashion she is remarkably pretty. You disappoint me, both of you. Psychologically you interest me; personally you disappoint me. I still ask myself what there is about Mademoiselle Estelle Dukane to have struck you both so completely off your feet."

The two young men exchanged pitying glances.

"Raoul would never understand," Dorchester sighed.

"He has no enthusiasms where women are concerned," Mark pointed out. "He understands and is faithful to one type only."

De Fontanay smiled.

"It is because I understand the type which has produced Mademoiselle Estelle Dukane," he said, "that I marvel at your ingenuousness. Meanwhile it would be odd if for the third time in succession our little parties were to be graced by a sight of the young lady. I have my suspicions about that long table. It looks as though it were reserved for some one of importance. Victor has twice been in himself to see that everything is to his liking."

He summoned the *maître d'hôtel* and inclined his head towards the table which was laid for twelve people almost in the middle of the room.

"For whom is that reserved?" he enquired.

"For the Right Honourable Mr. Fowler King, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, sir," the man replied. "He is entertaining Mr. Felix Dukane, the great millionaire, and his daughter."

De Fontanay sipped his wine thoughtfully.

"You see," he said, "the shadow of the end is already drifting upon the canvas. My unfortunate country will keep her word and sign her own death warrant. Germany will accept her obligations and Mr. Dukane will electrify the world by announcing the triumphant launching of his *chef d'œuvre* in finance—the greatest foreign loan ever made. Germany will accept the money humbly and will at once commence to drive you two—especially you, Henry—out of every market in the world."

"You'll get something for reparations at least," Mark pointed out.

"A very large sum," De Fontanay admitted, "but how will it benefit France? I have not heard that either your country or this one have any idea of cancelling our paper debt. You know quite well that with the first substantial payment of Germany to France will come a polite request from both of your countries for the funding of our debts."

There was a little stir at the entrance to the restaurant; a very distinguished company were assembling upon the threshold. In advance of the party came Fowler King, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, walking with bent head by Estelle's side. Already his manner indicated a certain subservience to her charm. Mark exchanged a sympathetic glance with Dorchester.

"I don't like the fellow myself," the latter groaned, "but the women all say that he is the most attractive man in London. Old Dukane would love to have a son-in-law who was Chancellor of the Exchequer. He could make out his budget for him."

Estelle looked across at both of them and smiled—a pleasant smile, but one which conveyed no special message to either. From the further end of the table Mr. Dukane exchanged a somewhat formal greeting with Mark.

"You don't seem to be very securely established in the old man's good books," Dorchester remarked cheerfully.

"Mr. Dukane expects a great deal from his friends," was the somewhat gloomy response.

"So does the young lady," De Fontanay observed significantly.

Mark laid his hand lightly upon the latter's shoulder. It was the first time a certain incident had been referred to between them.

"I don't see how I could have done anything except exactly what I did," he ventured.

"Perhaps not," De Fontanay admitted. "On the other hand—"

"I know what you were going to say," Mark interrupted. "I told Mr. Huventhayer about it the same day."

De Fontanay's eyebrows were slightly raised.

"Then I am bound to confess," he said, "that your Chief displayed a most unusual spirit of latitudinarianism."

"When you two have done fencing with each other," Dorchester interposed, "perhaps you can tell me whether it is true what I heard in the House last night—that the Conference would present its report next Thursday?"

Mark nodded.

"There is no secret about it," he assented. "A notice was sent to the Press yesterday to that effect."

"The sooner the better," Dorchester declared enthusiastically. "Until they have come to a decision the whole of the world will be in a state of suspense. They tell me that the Stock Exchange is a fever house, only nothing happens—nothing except rumours. No one has the courage to buy. No one can make up their minds to sell."

"And in the meantime," De Fontanay pointed out a little bitterly, "the franc falls and the pound rises. God knows why! If I had a single holding in English industrials, I should sell. Germany has made up her mind to accept whatever figures the Conference may decide upon and to pay. You know why? Of course you do. Her factories are running day and night and the flame of her forges paints the sky from Dusseldorf to Coblenz. In less than a decade of years you Englishmen with your absurd fiscal policy will not have one market left in the world. France will be prosperous enough externally. America, as usual, will financially govern the world.

Great Britain, who is really responsible for this Conference, will cease through sheer poverty to remain a world power."

"You're a gloomy prophet, Raoul," Mark declared.

"I see the truth," De Fontanay replied. "So long as Germany was seeking to evade her payments and we were firmly planted in the Ruhr, France was safe. The moment Germany decided to pay was the moment that she saw her way to become mistress of the world. England has probably nothing to fear except so far as her commerce is concerned, because it is upon her trade that Germany will batten, and America remains remote. But for France there remains nothing except to prepare herself as well as she may to face the great tragedy."

"You take too gloomy a view, Raoul, of the whole situation," Dorchester insisted, "but since we are talking seriously, what about the Ruhr policy? Wasn't it clear that from the moment you entered upon that enterprise you were sowing the seeds of a great hatred? Germany's counter-move may be long delayed but it is inevitable. She must pay because she must reëstablish herself amongst the nations. She will look upon the money she spends merely as an investment. Some day there will have to be a reckoning."

"Your reasoning is correct enough, Henry," De Fontanay admitted, "but tell me what France could have done?"

"She should never have consented to bind herself to accept the decision of the Conference," was the firm reply. "She should have insisted upon territorial guarantees until the Treaty of Versailles had been carried out. Her position would have been selfish but entirely logical. Her policy should have been to prevent Germany from ever being able to pay. She herself would have been very little worse off financially, because with-

out reparations from Germany she would have shelved her debt to America and ourselves indefinitely."

"That was not the way your statesmen talked to us when the Conference was at first proposed," De Fontanay pointed out.

"Our statesmen had to be firm," Dorchester declared. "The Conference was just as much a vital necessity for us as it may be a disaster for you. In any case it was inevitable. Even Belgium was clamouring for it. The fact of the matter is that for any practical purpose wars to-day have become utterly illogical. The more ruthlessly you punish an enemy the more trade you lose, and the more you deprive him of the power of paying back his debts to you."

They had finished their luncheon and a few moments later passed out into the lounge for their coffee. Estelle had flashed a quick little smile at the two young men but her father was absorbed in conversation with his host. Curiously enough, as they passed, the hum of conversation chanced to be suddenly abandoned. In an unexpected silence they distinctly heard Dukane's gruff voice. There was an angry, almost a threatening note in his words.

"If there should be a hitch at the last moment, the consequences would be worse for Europe than another war," he declared. "England, with her fetish of free trade, her declining industrial supremacy, and the huge debt which she is engaged to pay to America, would be as hopelessly bankrupt as Germany herself."

"Pleasant hearing!" Dorchester observed, as they reached the lounge.

"A hitch," Mark reflected. "He was angry too. I wonder what he meant?"

De Fontanay raised his liqueur glass to his lips. The toast he drank was a silent one.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE suspense which hung like a cloud over all Europe during the last few days of the Conference was reflected with curious actuality in the immediate neighbourhood of the great block of buildings in Whitehall, where the little group of men in whose hands the destinies of Europe seemed to remain were engaged in the final stages of their labours, weighing and summing up the evidence which they had extracted. Mark had spent a long and tedious day in the secretaries' sitting room without once having been summoned to the Conference Chamber. It was whilst seated in an easy-chair and glancing listlessly through one of the morning newspapers that he came across an almost insignificant item of news, which for a moment brought a catch to his breath. He read the paragraph again, folded up the newspaper, and made his way along the corridor to the apartment where Frances Moreland was at work. She started a little at his entrance and her welcome obviously lacked its usual sincerity.

"Much more to do?" he enquired.

"Another hour's work, at least," she told him. "They had Baron Hustein in again and cross-examined him about something or other."

Mark seated himself for a moment on the edge of the table. He noticed with dismay another neat pile of carbons.

"Why are you so extravagant?" he asked. "Surely you don't need a fresh carbon for every page?"

Her fingers drummed the table a little irritably.

"Why not?" she retorted. "I have three copies to do and I like the third one to be as distinct as the first. After all, they cost nothing."

"What happens," he enquired, "when you have completed your three copies and pinned them up? You are not allowed to take them out of the room, I suppose."

She shook her head.

"I send for General Action," she confided. "He comes here, signs for them and carries them away. Then I am free. I can't leave the place before then."

"New regulations?"

"They fancy that there has been some leakage," she said.

He looked for a moment thoughtfully out of the window.

"I am afraid there is no doubt that there has been leakage to a certain extent," he remarked. "During the last three weeks the money markets of the world have exactly risen and fallen, according to the temper of the Conference. When the week before last, for instance, there seemed almost a chance of a deadlock, every description of funds fell. Now things are going smoothly, they are rising all the time."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose it is difficult," she said, "to keep the trend of the deliberations entirely secret. There are one or two very great men—members of the Conference—whom I have known for years, whom I should never consider to be models of discretion."

Mark acquiesced thoughtfully.

"I daresay that is the explanation," he admitted, preparing to depart.

"Would you do me a service?" she asked suddenly.

"Of course I would," he answered.

"Mr. Sidney Howlett is waiting for me outside," she

confided. "I have no means of letting him know that I shall be an hour or an hour and a half late, and I am not allowed out of the place until I have signed off. I wonder, if I wrote him a note, would you take it to him?"

"Sure," Mark promised. "I should be delighted."

"Come back in five minutes," she begged. "I'll have it ready by then."

Mark made his way to his room, his hands in his pockets and a troubled frown upon his forehead. He locked up his own despatch box and papers, put on his hat and coat and presently returned to Frances' room. She handed him the note and a little packet, neatly tied up and sealed.

"If you would give these to Mr. Howlett," she said, "and tell him that I am detained, you will save his waiting for a long time and I shall be much obliged."

He glanced towards the table. The little pile of carbons had disappeared. The drawer too, which on his previous visit had seemed half full of them, was empty. Frances, with an air of complete composure, was fitting another sheet of paper into her machine, obviously only waiting for his departure to recommence her work. He turned slowly away.

"All right," he promised. "I'll go find the young man."

He took his leave and descended to the street. Mr. Sidney Howlett was easily discoverable, strolling up and down with his hands in his overcoat pockets and the fag end of a cigarette drooping listlessly from his lips. Mark addressed him cordially.

"I've a message from Miss Moreland," he said. "She asked me to tell you that she would be another hour or an hour and a half. Better come and have a drink at the Metropole Bar."

Howlett was at first a little surprised. Then he recognised Mark and became at once effusive.

"Righto!" he exclaimed. "I never heard a pleasanter suggestion. It's damned cold out here."

"Step in," Mark invited, leading the way to his car. "It's only a few yards but we may as well ride."

Howlett, a little overawed, seated himself amongst the deep cushions of the Rolls-Royce. Mark swung round the corner, parked his car at the side entrance to the hotel, and led the way to the Bar. He chose a secluded corner, signed to the attendant and ordered two whiskies and sodas. As soon as the man had disappeared he thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out the note.

"Oh, by the way," he said, "I was to give you this."

Howlett tore open the envelope unsuspiciously, read its contents through and frowned.

"Frances says something about a packet here," he observed, looking up.

Mark nodded.

"I have also a packet," he admitted.

The young man stretched out his hand, but Mark made no further movement. At that moment the waiter served their drinks. They raised their glasses to each other in mechanical fashion. Howlett's fingers were trembling.

"About that packet?" he asked.

"I'm going to be very frank with you, Mr. Howlett," Mark said seriously. "I have always had the utmost esteem and regard for Miss Moreland and it seems incredible to me that she could be guilty of any action that was not strictly honourable. At the same time, I have certain reasons for entertaining a very grave suspicion as to the contents of this packet. I propose that we open it together. If it contains nothing of a compromising nature I shall owe you both my sincere apologies, which I hope you will accept. On the other

hand if we find what I have some reason to suspect may be there, I shall have a proposition to make to you."

Sidney Howlett attempted to bluster.

"I can't understand what the devil you're talking about," he declared. "As a matter of fact there's nothing in the packet worth a snap of the fingers—nothing at all."

"Then open it or allow me to do so," Mark suggested.

"I will open it when I choose," was the angry retort. "It's no concern of yours, anyway."

Mark leaned a little over the table.

"You know my position," he said. "I am an American. I am under no obligation to the British Secret Service, or the British police. Not a soul knows what I am saying to you this evening or of my suspicions. There is no reason why they should ever know. All the same I am going to act as I think well in this matter, and if you decline to open the packet I shall do so myself."

"I tell you that it contains nothing of any moment, whatever," Howlett insisted.

"Very well," Mark replied coolly, as he cut the string, "in that case there is no harm in a little curiosity, is there?"

He drew out the pile of carbons, neatly arranged with sheets of oil paper between each.

"Carbons! Old carbons!" Howlett scoffed. "That's a great find, isn't it? No use to anybody."

"So I might have thought a short time ago," Mark agreed. "Unfortunately, however, the *Post* has given the show away. There was a little paragraph there this morning pointing out how carbons could be treated with a certain preparation, and put into a printing press, and under great pressure the original impressions would be reproduced."

Howlett put up his hand to his suddenly damp forehead. His assurance was gone. He was obviously terrified.

"What are you going to do about it?" he demanded hoarsely.

"It was you, I suppose, who induced Miss Moreland to do this?" Mark asked.

"Of course it was," was the somewhat sullen response. "The stuff isn't worth much, anyway. It will all be published in a few days now."

"Nevertheless," Mark observed drily, "there are circumstances, especially connected with the money market, when a little previous knowledge is a wonderful thing. How much were you going to receive for these carbons?"

"Five thousand pounds," the young man groaned.

"Very well," Mark continued, "if I keep the transaction a secret, are you content to accept the five thousand pounds from me in exchange for the carbons?"

Howlett's confidence was slowly commencing to reassert itself. He sat up and stared across at his companion.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. "Sell them to you instead? What do you want with them?"

"That's my affair," was the curt reply. "It doesn't matter to you whom you deal with, does it? You can have a cheque now."

Howlett tugged nervously at his little moustache. He was perplexed but eager.

"It's a deal," he assented. "We'll call it a deal."

Mark signed to the waiter to replenish their glasses, moved across to a writing table at the further end of the room and returned with a cheque payable to Sidney Howlett for five thousand pounds.

"I've left it open, as you see," he pointed out. "You can get the money for it to-morrow morning. Now I

am going to ask you a question. How are you going to divide up with Miss Moreland? What is her interest to be?"

The young man hesitated. The cheque was safely bestowed in his waistcoat pocket.

"We're probably going to get married some time—Miss Moreland and I," he confided.

"'Probably' is a little vague," Mark objected. "I happen to know that the reason Miss Moreland has departed from her principles to this extent is so that you may have the money to start life together. She has paid the price and there must be no disappointment. You understand?"

"I shall keep my word, if that's what you mean," the young man muttered.

"I shall see that you keep it," Mark assured him significantly. "The carbons will remain in my possession until after you have been married. Let's see, it takes three weeks in England, doesn't it? Say a month then. A month from to-day, I shall destroy the carbons and attend your wedding."

"You seem to take a great interest in Miss Moreland," Howlett remarked curiously. "How long have you known her?"

"A very short time, but long enough to respect and like her as I might my own sister. I think you are a very lucky person, Mr. Howlett."

"Supposing she doesn't wish to be married quite so soon?"

"I think you will find there will be no difficulty about that."

The drinks were brought and disposed of almost in silence. Afterwards Mark rose to his feet.

"Not a word to Miss Moreland, mind," he enjoined. "So far as she knows, the deal has been carried out.

As soon as you are married and the honeymoon is over, you can tell her the truth."

"I wish I could understand what you are doing this for," Howlett observed suspiciously. "It beats me altogether. Five thousand pounds is a nice bit of money to chuck away on those carbons, when you don't mean to make any use of them."

Mark was busy putting on his coat. Then he drew on his gloves deliberately.

"There are some things," he said, as he turned away, "which I do not think that you could ever understand."

CHAPTER XXVII

A MOMENT of good fortune befell Mark that evening as he made his way, one of a swaying multitude, through the great reception rooms of Cruton House. He was stopped by a polo acquaintance on the fringe of a little group of minor royalties, and a moment later Estelle herself was by his side. An unexpected divergence of the group and an adroit movement of Mark's left them almost alone.

"Well," she asked, "enjoying yourself?"

"Not much until this moment," he admitted. "It sounds ungracious but it is at least truthful. There are too many people here."

She glanced down the rooms. There was a vista of countless heads, bejewelled and coronetted, men in uniform and Court dress, of couples swaying to the music beyond, of a packed concert room in the distance.

"London is a very friendly city," she murmured. "Have you seen my father?"

"I expect to pay him a visit to-morrow morning," Mark replied. "I have heard from Brennan. I had a note from him just before I came out."

There was a general movement of the people to hear a great singer. She drew him towards a little recess, now almost untenanted, and motioned to a footman.

"Serve us with some champagne," she directed. "Tell me at once about Brennan."

"He seems to have kept his word," Mark replied. "He promised, as I told you, that he would send for me when

he was ready to deal. I am to be at the Milan Court at half-past twelve to-night."

She laid her fingers upon his arm.

"You must succeed," she begged earnestly. "That woman is still with him, I hear, and your friend, the Marquis de Fontanay, would give his soul for those papers. You must secure them. Do you hear—Mark? You must get them from him."

"I certainly will," Mark declared confidently. "He must mean business or he wouldn't have kept his word and sent for me. Besides, although the girl is a danger, of course, after all he is a German. I shouldn't think he'd want to deal with a Frenchman."

"A man of that type has no patriotic feelings," she asserted earnestly. "He is just a cold-blooded automaton, working for his own advantage."

"If he were that," Mark observed, "he would scarcely be so obstinate in refusing to deal with your father."

"My father made one of the few mistakes of his life in quarrelling with him," she confessed. "Furthermore, there has always been bad blood between them. We shall have to rely upon you."

She looked suddenly into his eyes, and he was conscious of a curious relaxation of her occasionally almost aloof demeanour. Her smile seemed to have a more subtle meaning, her eyes a gentler softness. Even her body as she leaned a little towards him seemed to bespeak a new and very desirable graciousness.

"You must not fail," she whispered. "I cannot tell you how much it means to us. I know that most people would tell you to-day that my father was one of the richest men in the world. Perhaps on paper he is. If Brennan's information is really what he says—and Baron Hustein himself admits that it may be—its publication might mean almost ruin to us."

"Ruin!" Mark repeated. "It is incredible."

"The incredible is sometimes possible," she murmured.

And then the drama of it all seemed to sweep in upon him suddenly and he realised, with almost miraculous intensity, the haunting anxiety which during the last few months had carved deeper lines in Felix Dukane's worn face. From where they sat, retired though the spot was, he could catch a long vista of perhaps the most wonderful reception rooms in the world. In every direction were moving a constant throng of men in uniform and Court dress, women in tiaras, coronets and flashing jewels, in marvellous toilettes, beautiful with the adornment of art or nature, or both, and in the background the music, the softly played music, of the new dance. A thousand lights appeared to flash from the chandeliers which were the glory of the great house. It was like a scene from some modern Arabian Nights, the epitome of all that was delightful and beautiful in the modern world. And curiously enough, just at that moment there came into view, upon the threshold of one of the farther rooms, the giver of the feast himself—Dukane, stolid, not without a certain dignity, and by his side a familiar figure of royalty.

"Ruin!" Mark repeated once more. "Such a thing seems absurd."

She had become curiously and wonderfully human. A certain indifference amounting almost to hardness, which had at times repelled him, at times sapped his courage, seemed to have passed from her personality. She was very beautiful and the light in her eyes had become more real, her mouth to have lost its doubtful lines and acquired a new tenderness.

"It is hard to explain," she murmured, "but this at least you ought to be able to understand; my father has made all his arrangements to conclude the loan for the

first German payments and the loss would be enormous if he were not able to use the money for that purpose. If Brennan's disclosures were once laid before the Conference, Germany would be mulcted of an impossible sum which she would never attempt to pay, and my father himself would probably be implicated in the scandal which would follow. Mark, you must succeed to-night."

She suddenly took his hand. He leaned down and looked passionately into her eyes.

"Estelle," he promised, "I will get possession of the papers if I have to shake the breath out of Brennan's body to do so."

A few yards away Raoul de Fontanay passed, talking earnestly to the Ambassador of his country. Estelle drew her hand from Mark's.

"Be careful," she whispered. "That is the one person I fear."

De Fontanay paused, whispered a word to his companion and, turning abruptly, came towards the two. He bowed very low before Estelle.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "I have had the honour of paying my respects to your joint chaperones, the Princess Rospignolli and the Duchess of Croome, but I have not yet had the pleasure of paying my respects to you—my hostess."

She smiled as she gave him her fingers.

"We have had to divide ourselves almost into detachments," she explained. "The Duchess was kind enough to look after some of the English people whom we scarcely knew, my godmother helped to receive our European friends, and I just came in where I was wanted. As you see for yourself, I am now neglecting my duties shamefully."

"I will not say that I envy Van Stratton, because he is my friend," De Fontanay remarked, "but he is at least

fortunate. Have you heard the rumours which are being passed around to-night?"

"I have heard nothing," she replied.

"What sort of rumours, Raoul?" Mark enquired.

"They say," De Fontanay went on, speaking with a certain lightness but with his eyes fixed upon Estelle, "that an application has been made on behalf of one of the countries represented at the Conference—perhaps it would be more discreet not to say which country—begging for a week's delay before the announcement of the final figures. Have you heard anything of this, Mark?"

"Nothing."

Estelle swung her fan lightly before her face. Her eyes met De Fontanay's without flinching.

"I thought," she observed, "that the figures were already arrived at, and that the result was to be announced almost immediately."

"I too," De Fontanay agreed. "Something may have happened. One can never tell. There have been rumours going about, you know, for the last few days."

"Rumours?" she queried softly.

"Nothing definite, of course," De Fontanay continued, "just the mutterings before a storm, which, after all, may not break."

Estelle yawned.

"Well," she said, "I hope that whatever happens they do not keep this thing dragging on much longer. Shall we have one more short dance, Mr. Van Stratton? After that I must return to my duties."

De Fontanay bowed and passed on. For a moment Estelle's fingers rested heavily upon Mark's arm.

"Perhaps," she predicted anxiously, "Brennan's message is only to tell you that he has already parted with his papers. There was something a little exultant about the Marquis."

Mark shook his head.

"I think not," he answered. "I don't believe De Fontanay would have mentioned the matter at all if he had met with success. He was watching you closely all the time. I think he was just trying to find out whether you were nervous or confident. I will get you those papers, Estelle."

They danced among the palms, surrounded by packed ranks of onlookers, danced to the fashionable music of the moment, until Mark, in a sudden fit of exaltation, gathered his partner lightly but firmly into his arms and sought the less crowded places.

"If the Conference fails," he whispered, "you will never be a queen."

"If it succeeds," she rejoined. "I hope the man whom I marry will never believe that I am not."

Her arms pressed his gently for a moment. He forced her eyes to look into his.

"I'll go there now, Estelle," he said.

The absence of that faint tinge of mockery left her smile entirely tender.

"Even for that," she begged, "not until the music stops."

CHAPTER XXVIII

Mark, admitted to the sitting room at the Milan Court by a very changed Mademoiselle Zona—Mademoiselle in an evening gown and hat of Parisian design, a string of pearls around her neck and her hair dressed in the latest fashion—came to an abrupt pause as soon as he had crossed the threshold. Brennan, himself carefully dressed in evening clothes, with a white carnation in his buttonhole, welcomed him with a cordial wave of the hand—but Brennan was not alone. Raoul de Fontanay, who had apparently just divested himself of his coat and hat, was seated in the opposite easy-chair.

"A little more confidence on your part," the latter remarked, "and we might have shared a taxi."

"Why couldn't I say the same about you?" Mark retorted, accepting the chair to which Brennan had pointed.

"It was not for me," De Fontanay observed, with obvious intent, "to interrupt your very delightful flirtation with Estelle Dukane."

Brennan made a grimace. He turned a frowning face upon Mark.

"You are still intimate with that household?" he demanded.

"With Felix Dukane I have very little to do," Mark replied. "He hasn't much use for me or I for him. I do not see how my friendship with his daughter is any one's concern except my own, or—may I add—how it affects these proceedings in any way?"

Brennan nodded judicially.

"You are perhaps right," he admitted. "In any case, I think we can now proceed towards the discussion of that little matter of business which has brought us together."

"In whose interests, may I ask," Raoul de Fontanay enquired softly, "does Mr. Van Stratton intervene?"

"An apt question," Brennan admitted. "Yes, a very apt question, because it leads up to something which I have to say. Will you answer the Marquis, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"I am here prepared to bid for what Mr. Brennan has to sell on my own account and in my own interests," Mark declared firmly.

"An incredible statement," De Fontanay expostulated, throwing his cigarette into the fire. "Of what possible use could those papers be to you?"

"That is my business," was the curt rejoinder. "I believe in the truth of Mr. Brennan's statements as to the amazing nature of the discovery he has made, and I also believe that its revelation at the last moment might destroy the whole labours of the Conference. America does not desire that the Conference should fail. I have the money to spend and I am willing to buy his secret."

"I suggest," De Fontanay said, turning to Brennan, "that you ask Mr. Van Stratton this plain question: is he here on behalf of Felix Dukane or on his own account."

"You anticipate my own intention," Brennan declared. "I intend, however, to go a little further. I intend to say to our young friend here that if I sell him my information, he must pledge his word of honour not to pass it on either to Felix Dukane or Baron Hustein, or any one of that group."

De Fontanay took a fresh cigarette from his case, lit it and leaned back in his chair. He was watching

Mark closely. Mademoiselle, seated at the table in the centre of the room, listened eagerly to every word, her expression tense, almost strained.

"I have already disclosed my reason for wishing to bid for the papers," Mark said. "I am perfectly willing, however, to give you the pledge you desire. If the papers are sold to me I will part with them neither to Dukane nor Hustein nor any of their friends."

Brennan nodded approvingly. Mademoiselle's eyes flashed.

"But you came first," she persisted, "upon Felix Dukane's account. You admitted it."

"That is quite true," Mark replied. "It is also quite true that under ordinary circumstances I might have passed them on to Felix Dukane, but since Mr. Brennan makes it a condition of their sale that I do not do so, I accept it. I will buy them on my own account. The secret, whatever it may be, shall be mine, to use as I may determine."

"Men have sometimes broken their word of honour for a woman's sake," Mademoiselle declared, with a flickering sob of passion in her tone.

"A man," Mark retorted, "would not have made that speech to me with impunity."

Brennan tapped lightly with a finger upon the table.

"We waste time," he said. "What I am proposing is a little auction sale at which you two are the bidders. You all know what I have to offer. In the course of my career I have been a naturalised Frenchman, a naturalised German, a naturalised Englishman. I was born, as a matter of fact, in Asia Minor, and my grandfather was an Armenian. Of definite nationality or of patriotism, its fruit, I possess none at all. Germany, France, America or England, they are all one to me. I sell my secret, which represents the great triumph of my life,

the one unparalleled feat in the history of any secret service, to the highest bidder. One exception there is, and one only. I will not sell to Felix Dukane. That is why I have asked our young American friend on whose account he is a bidder. I am satisfied with his reply. And one further condition I make. It is, you would say, a tribute to my vanity. Never mind. The contents of that box have cost the lives of several of my associates and that I myself escaped from Germany alive is a veritable miracle. I offer you here the greatest feat which the art of espionage has ever accomplished. I demand to be present when the box is opened, that I may read my triumph in your faces."

"I agree," De Fontanay declared.

"And I," Mark echoed.

De Fontanay leaned forward in his chair.

"Brennan," he said, "I do not know the extent of Van Stratton's banking account, but it is very certain that the sum which either of us is prepared to pay would be sufficient to keep you in luxury for the rest of your life. I claim that France has the greater right to the fruits of your labour. If you sell elsewhere, you become a participant, an aider and abettor in a nefarious plot."

Brennan's smile was almost contemptuous.

"The suggestion makes no appeal to me," he confessed. "One who has led my life has outlived conscience. Remember," he went on, "that during the years I spent in Germany I stood each day on the threshold of death. Yet with that atmosphere around me, I discovered in due course a most astounding secret—a secret which is shared by at most eleven Germans, and not a soul outside that country. This is no idle boast of mine. I swear to you that whoever purchases the key which I shall presently offer, and opens my box, will receive the

sensation of his life. I shall sell to the highest bidder. Kindly make all your offers in pounds sterling."

"I shall offer you," Mark said, "fifty thousand pounds."

Brennan sighed gently.

"In these days," he murmured, "the interest on fifty thousand pounds, living say in South America, would only supply one with a pitifully inadequate income, even supposing I were unable to succeed in the desire of my life and persuade Mademoiselle Zona to accompany me. Mademoiselle Zona is charming, but she has the Frenchwoman's gift for spending money. The offer is one which is scarcely worthy of you, my dear Mr. Van Stratton."

"I propose to double it," De Fontanty announced promply.

"The proceedings," Brennan admitted, "commence to be interesting. Dear Zona, if one might trouble you, the wires are already cut—permit me."

He reached towards the sideboard and cut the strings from a bottle of champagne. Zona filled the glasses and carried them round. Brennan looked on with a smile.

"That is very good," he said. "We continue this little affair on a friendly basis. So far, what has happened may be treated as a joke. Shall I prepare myself for a serious bid?"

"Would it be possible," De Fontanay enquired, "for me to have a few words in private with Mr. Van Stratton?"

Brennan's gesture of refusal was uncompromising.

"Certainly not," he replied. "You are my only two bidders. Is it likely that I should permit you to come to an understanding? Afterwards what arrangement you two may make does not concern me. I shall probably be on my way to a new country and, I trust," he added, with a little smile at Zona, "to a happier life."

"In that case," the Marquis said, "I shall make you at once my final bid—the whole extent of the resources which I can command. I offer you for your papers two hundred thousand pounds."

"A quarter of a million," Mark proposed.

Brennan beamed upon them both.

"Capital," he exclaimed. "The affair becomes of interest. Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds is not a great fortune as things are to-day, but it is a sum not to be despised. We have not heard the last from you, I trust, Monsieur le Marquis?"

De Fontanay rose suddenly to his feet and rested his hand upon Mark's shoulder.

"I have no money with which to increase my bid, but, Mark, listen to me. This is not an affair of millions. Can you not see that for yourself? Is it right of you to use your wealth in an evil cause? You are assisting towards a great tragedy if you buy those papers. It is not fair to France, it is not fair to civilisation. Even if you do not hand them over to him, you are acting on Dukane's instigation. You know what will happen. You will be Dukane's puppet; you will keep silent at his behest. Germany will have fooled us and the world as she has always fooled us. Mark," De Fontanay continued earnestly, "you are acting against your own conscience and your own convictions. You are acting for the man who is going to finance Germany to prosperity, provided the terms fixed upon by the Conference are accepted. Strength, with Germany, means war, and another war means the ruin of my country."

Brennan tapped the table with his pencil.

"Really, gentlemen," he protested, "this seems to me beside the point. Mr. Van Stratton has offered me two hundred and fifty thousand pounds for the key of the box in which my papers repose. If you have no further

bid to make, Marquis, let us consider these proceedings at an end."

De Fontanay's grip upon Mark's shoulder tightened. His face was very white.

"I think I know the truth, Mark," he sighed. "You would put your infatuation for that girl before your sense of justice, your sense of honour."

"I am sorry, Raoul," Mark replied. "I don't see why you need assume that I'm in this only on her account, but if I were, I wouldn't be the first man who forgot everything else in life for a woman's sake. Now I'm going to write my cheque."

De Fontanay released his friend's arm as though his fingers had been stung. He crossed the room and whispered in Zona's ear. She leaned over and spoke to Brennan. He shook his head coldly.

"My friends," he announced, "I have no wish to interfere in that little argument which undoubtedly has its interest to both of you, but the time has, I think, arrived for us to conclude this matter. If you have no further bid to make, Marquis, I shall give up my key to Mr. Van Stratton in return for his cheque for two hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

"I can make no further bid," De Fontanay admitted. "My funds are exhausted."

"In what manner, may I ask," Brennan enquired, "do you propose to make over this somewhat large sum, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"I can give you a cheque on the Bank of England for one hundred thousand pounds," Mark replied, "and a sight draft on New York which you can clear by cable for the balance."

"I accept your proposal," Brennan agreed.

He offered his place to Mark, who made out his cheque. In the meanwhile Brennan spoke through the telephone

to the office and gave a few instructions. In a moment or two a clerk from below, attended by a commissionaire, arrived. They handed a little packet to Brennan, who signed for it and waved them away with a word of thanks. On their departure he broke the heavy seal and withdrew the key from the wooden box.

"This has been in your possession once before," he reminded Mark. "You know where and how to use it. Let me refill your glasses. A very pleasant transaction. Marquis, I regret that you are a loser in this little deal, but I congratulate my friend Mr. Van Stratton on his enterprise. A quarter of a million pounds may seem to you a great deal of money, but for many days in Germany I not only risked my life but I risked it with heavy odds against me. I should have been shot, I think, Marquis, if I had been discovered."

"You would have been shot as a spy on sight," De Fontanay assented. "And let me add," he went on, under his breath, "I wish to God now that you had been."

"So you see," Brennan continued, with an amiable smile, "that quarter of a million has been well earned. There wasn't a day when I was quite sure that I shouldn't feel a hand upon my shoulder. I could have been trapped very easily, especially in Hamburg. You two think, I suppose, that it needs no courage to do that sort of thing. You are wrong. I am not sure that it is not the highest form of courage which keeps you there with no chance of excitement to uphold you, apparently plodding along with a hundred others, yet knowing that the slightest slip, the slightest ill chance, and the telephone would ring, and first a great policeman, and then a squad of soldiers—and the end, within a few minutes. Believe me, Mr. Van Stratton, I have earned your two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. You won't finish the bottle, gentlemen? There is another upon the sideboard."

They bade him a somewhat curt farewell. Zona, who had been seated in a corner, her face buried in her hands, rose also to her feet. She looked towards De Fontanay. He shook his head and she subsided into her place.

"Will you give me a lift home, Mark?" De Fontanay asked.

Mark hesitated for a moment.

"Why not?" he assented. "I was wondering whether it was too late to go back to Cruton House."

"And announce your exploit," his friend observed bitterly. "Well, if you do that, you can still drop me on the way."

CHAPTER XXIX

Mark was aware of a curious sense of uneasiness as he reclined, a quarter of an hour later, in De Fontanay's most comfortable arm-chair and watched his host mixing the drinks at the sideboard. There was something fantastic about their recent duel; a touch of the sinister about the insistent invitation which had induced him to mount the stairs. Yet, when De Fontanay returned and sank wearily into the opposite chair, Mark could feel nothing but shame for the half-born thoughts in his mind.

"I suppose you do not mind answering one question?" the former said gravely, as he lit a cigarette. "Whether you were honest in your attitude or not, you still bought those papers at Dukane's instigation?"

"It was from Dukane I first heard of them, naturally," Mark replied. "It is entirely his estimate of their value which I have accepted."

"You have bought, as they say in England, a pig in a poke," De Fontanay observed.

"I suppose I have been more or less of a fool," Mark acknowledged. "Yet I am willing to take Dukane's word for this. He insists upon it that if Brennan's information were laid before the Conference the whole of its work during the last two months will have gone for nothing. That in itself was sufficient to decide me."

"But wouldn't it be better," De Fontanay exclaimed, with flashing eyes, "that Europe should remain in a state of unsettlement and dislocation rather than that Ger-

many should have this great chance of returning cheaply to her place amongst the nations?"

Mark shook his head.

"Raoul," he pointed out, "you look at things from one point of view and one point of view only—from France's. Germany rehabilitated will mean prosperity for the whole of the rest of the world, for after all Germany is one of the greatest productive and industrial forces existing. You would retard her progress solely from the point of view of personal security."

"You were with us in '16 and you saw what happened. Do you blame me?"

"I do not blame you but neither do I sympathise with you," Mark continued earnestly. "The attempted strangulation of a country is unnatural. It cannot be done. France has already delayed the rehabilitation of the world for two years. She cannot do so indefinitely. I say this, Raoul, I who am a friend of France, who fought over there and who understand the tragedy of those horrible days. What I would fight for, what I would devote every effort in life to, what in my small way I intend to work for myself, are guarantees for France. I see no reason why she should not obtain these."

"From your country?" De Fontanay asked quickly.

Mark hesitated.

"We are a difficult nation for that sort of thing," he admitted. "Our politics have a heterogeneous basis which makes interference in foreign affairs a very complicated business. France would have to rely primarily upon England."

De Fontanay smiled a little bitterly.

"England is not a military nation," he said, "nor will she ever become one. She kept her pledge to us in '14 as well as she could, but you saw the result. Next time

when Germany moves, she will move in different fashion. She will take no foolish chances as she did before. She will make a certainty of the whole thing. If you hold up those papers, providing they are of such a nature as Felix Dukane himself admits, Germany will be in a position to wage war again in ten years."

"You're too much of a pessimist, Raoul," Mark argued. "Every one talks about Germany's preparations for war. One finds everywhere little sensational paragraphs in the papers about secret training and breaches of the disarmament treaty, but when they are looked into there is generally very little in them. Besides, there are many things of which you take no account. The rehabilitation of Germany will mean her inclusion amongst the League of Nations."

De Fontanay leaned back in his chair and laughed mirthlessly.

"Mark," he said, "you are not a fool but you talk like a fool. Do you believe for one moment that Germany will respect any pledge she gives to the League of Nations when her day comes? An absurdity! You have brought me face to face to-night," he went on gravely, "with a terrible situation. You have used your wealth to buy the papers which might give my country at least another thirty years of respite, for nothing else but for a woman's sake. Your interest in the whole affair, however you may argue and try to deceive even yourself, is profoundly selfish. Therefore, although we are friends who have looked at death together, although it is true that you saved my life, I must tell you that all personal sentiments in these few minutes fade away. I am forced to see in you only the enemy of my country."

Mark stiffened a little in all his limbs. His hand crept down to his pocket. He had a curious sense of being no longer alone with De Fontanay. He looked search-

ingly around. The windows and door were closed but the curtains leading to the bedchamber had trembled.

"You threaten me, Raoul?" he asked.

"I must have that key," was the firm reply. "It is not I, Mark, who needs it. It is France."

"And if I refuse, as I shall do?"

"Think for a moment," De Fontanay pleaded. "You outbid me because of your wealth. I was driven to argue with you. I was driven to rely upon your friendship, upon my belief in your sense of honour. Again I was disappointed. I am driven now to the last and most terrible expedient. You may not leave this room, Mark, unless you part with the key."

"Is it you and I alone?" Mark demanded.

De Fontanay shook his head.

"It is so I should have preferred it," he answered, "but again I have not myself to think of. I dishonour friendship for the sake of my country."

The words sounded strangely on Mark's ears. For the second time within the last few minutes he was conscious of a curious buzzing in his ears, a sensation of intense and unnatural sleepiness. He tried to rise from his seat and staggered back again. All the time De Fontanay was looking at him sadly.

"Damn you, Raoul!" he faltered. "I'd rather—have fought."

"I had to choose the safest means," De Fontanay replied, as he watched his friend collapse.

Mark returned to consciousness slowly, a feeling of languor in his limbs and a confused sense of unreal noises still echoing in his brain. He sat up gradually and looked about him. His coat and collar had been removed and were lying upon the table by his side, together with a small heap of his personal belongings. At the further end of the room, Raoul himself, a Colonel Jacques

de Fayenne, whom Mark knew as his assistant, and a third man, a stranger, were talking in low tones. By degrees it became apparent that De Fayenne was urging a course upon Raoul to which the latter objected.

"You have run this risk for nothing then!" De Fayenne exclaimed excitedly. "We are to be fooled by this ignorant young American—you and I, De Fontanay, heads of the French Secret Service. There is little that he can have done with the key. He must be made to tell where it is—made to before he regains his strength."

De Fontanay shook his head.

"He will never tell," he said. "He is a brave man and my friend. I have gone far enough."

Their voices dropped to a whisper. Mark sat up and examined the contents of his pocket which were scattered upon the table. His automatic pistol had been withdrawn, but everything else was in order. Slowly he picked up his collar and fastened it round his neck, arranged his tie, rose to his feet and put on his coat. The three men, suddenly aware of his recovery, broke off in their conversation. De Fontanay came across the room and stood before his friend.

"Well?"

Mark was quietly stowing away his belongings in his pocket. He made no answer for a moment.

"Feeling queer?" De Fontanay continued.

"Like the morning after an almighty jag," Mark replied in a colourless tone. "Can I go?"

De Fayenne stood up. He was a tall, lean-faced man, who had lost one arm in the war, but had won many decorations and honours.

"Not yet," he answered sharply.

"I can assure you," Mark began—

"We want that key," De Fayenne interrupted.

"The key?"

"We want the key of the safe deposit vault which contains the papers you bought to-night from Brennan," De Fayenne persisted.

"I gathered that you wanted something which you thought was in my possession," Mark observed drily.

"We still want it," De Fayenne reminded him.

Mark looked at his opponent speculatively. It was a cruel face, the face of a man reckless in courage and determined of purpose.

"Well, as you see, I have it no longer," he pointed out.

"Then it remains for you to tell us where it is," De Fayenne rejoined.

Mark smiled.

"If I had wished you to have it," he confided, "I should have brought it along."

"But how on earth did you dispose of it," De Fontanay intervened. "You took it from its packet in the sitting room at the Milan, and thrust it into your waistcoat pocket. We left the place together and you did not speak to a soul."

"The mistake so many people have made about me," Mark explained, as he finished tying his tie, "is that they imagine because I am big that I am therefore a fool. I did not think you would go so far as this, Raoul, although I was quite aware that it wasn't hospitality alone you were thinking of offering me this evening. I felt I was entering the lion's den when I crossed the threshold."

De Fayenne, a light in his eyes more sinister than ever, took De Fontanay by the arm.

"De Fontanay," he insisted, "will you explain to your friend that we waste time. Make him understand that we are serious men and that we must have that key."

De Fontanay turned towards his friend. His tone had become almost appealing.

"Mark," he said, "I know that the money doesn't count for much, but sooner or later you shall have the quarter of a million you paid for it. De Fayenne is right to insist upon your giving up the key. We are the servants of France. It is our duty to risk everything to attain our purpose. It is our duty even to bring suffering the most horrible upon a friend if that should help."

"You think that you can torture me?" Mark asked, a little scornfully. "You should know me better, Raoul."

"I know you well enough, unfortunately," was the sorrowful reply. "These others do not. De Fayenne has his own methods."

Mark looked across the room. De Fayenne was holding a small revolver in his hand, as also was the other man. Mark sighed. His knees still felt like paper. His arm was useless.

"I shall not tell you where the key is," he pronounced deliberately. "You can adopt what methods of compulsion you desire, and to which my friend Monsieur le Marquis de Fontanay," he added, looking at Raoul, "will consent."

De Fontanay turned away with a little groan. Suddenly the three men stiffened to attention. There was the sound of heavy footsteps outside, a clamorous ringing of the bell, followed shortly by two knocks upon the door. The third man hurried to the window, lifted the blind and glanced down.

"The police!" he muttered.

De Fontanay moved towards the hall. De Fayenne lifted his few inches of shining steel and drew a little nearer to Mark.

"You will not move," he directed. "You will not speak."

De Fontanay opened the outside door. A police officer was standing there, the rain streaming down from his mackintosh cape.

"Is that your car standing outside, sir?" he demanded.

"I guess it's mine," Mark called out loudly. "Step inside, officer. I'd like to speak to you about it."

There was a moment's tense silence. One could hear the sound of De Fayenne's indrawn breath of anger. Nevertheless his arm dropped and the pistol disappeared. The police constable entered the room.

"If that is your car, sir," he said, addressing Mark, "I shall require your name and address. It has been standing in the street over two hours."

"I am very sorry," Mark replied. "The time seemed to slip away."

"Dangerous thing to do, sir, leave a car all that time, besides being against the law," the man went on. "I am sorry to tell you that there seems to have been a thief at work."

"A thief!" Mark repeated incredulously.

"You had better come down with me at once," the man suggested. "You will find things in a nice state, your cushions ripped up, and a rare mess inside."

"I'll come right down," Mark assented, picking up his overcoat and hat, and moving towards the door. "I was just leaving, anyhow. Good night, Raoul! Good night, gentlemen!"

No one answered. A glance of fierce questioning passed between De Fayenne and De Fontanay, and the third man crept a little nearer to the door. De Fontanay shook his head. That ponderous figure with the dripping mackintosh cloak represented an *impasse*. He held the door open.

"Good night, Mark," he said. "Sure you won't have another drink before you go?"

"Not to-night, thanks," was the emphatic reply. "I'm not sure that your whisky agrees with me."

They passed out together—Mark and the officer.

The door closed behind them. They descended the three flights of stairs into the street. Mark held his hand to his head for a moment.

"Nothing wrong up there, sir?" the man asked curiously.

"Nothing exactly wrong, officer," he replied, "but these reunions get a little wearisome at times."

"Seemed to me those two gentlemen were looking a little ugly," the officer observed.

"I think," Mark confided, "that they were annoyed with me for leaving so early."

CHAPTER XXX

At half-past eleven on the following morning Mark, with the hall porter of the Milan Court by his side, stood awaiting the descent of the lift. As soon as it had arrived and its solitary passenger had departed, the hall porter produced a key from his pocket, unlocked the contribution box to Doctor Barnardo's Homes which was fixed inside, withdrew a small key and handed it to Mark.

"That your property, sir?" he enquired.

"That's what I'm looking for," Mark replied, stowing it carefully away. "Much obliged to you, Harris. You can put this ten-pound note into the box for the Homes and here's a fiver for yourself."

The man was not unnaturally a little staggered. He obeyed instructions, however, and carefully placed the five-pound note in a worn pocketbook.

"I'm sure I'm very grateful to you, sir," he acknowledged. "I don't think that box has ever had more than an odd shilling or two in it since I can remember. If I might take the liberty, sir, I would like to ask how the key got in there?"

Mark smiled.

"To tell you the truth, Harris," he admitted, "I dropped it in on purpose. I was with rather a strange crowd last night and I knew they wanted the key. I had a chance of dropping it in unobserved and it seemed to me that the box was as safe a hiding place as any."

The man chuckled.

"Very clever idea, sir, if you'll allow me to say so,"

he observed. "I'm glad you've got it back all right anyway, and good morning, sir."

He retreated behind his counter and Mark, reëntering his car, drove to Cruton House. The great courtyard was filled with tradesmen's and decorators' vehicles, removing the débris of the festivities of the night before, and the front of the house was in an almost similar state of confusion. Mark, on giving his name, however, was conducted without delay to a room upon the first floor, half library, half sitting room, where Felix Dukane was seated at an open desk, smoking a black cigar and writing. He looked up at Mark's entrance and scowled anxiously.

"Well?" he exclaimed.

"I have been both successful and unsuccessful, sir," Mark confessed.

"Don't beat about the bush," Dukane insisted. "Have you got the key to the safe deposit vault or haven't you?"

"I have it," Mark assured him. "The box containing the papers is certainly in my possession. No one else can get at them."

So far as a countenance such as Mr. Dukane's was capable of betraying emotion, it betrayed it then. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief.

"Why the hell didn't you say so at first?" he demanded.

"Because," Mark replied, "although so far as I know it makes very little difference—in fact it is according to our arrangement—I had to give my word of honour that I was treating for these papers on my own account. That is to say, that they must remain absolutely in my possession and not be handed over to any one."

Dukane's underlip protruded.

"What does that matter," he demanded, "so long as

the Frenchman hasn't got them? Have you opened the box yet?"

"Not yet," Mark admitted. "I am half inclined to wait until the Conference is over."

"I should," Dukane assented eagerly. "How much did you have to pay for them?"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

"Do you want a cheque?"

"That had better be a subject for future arrangement," Mark observed. "The papers are perfectly safe, at any rate until after the end of the Conference. I have pledged my word not to hand them over to you, so I am not sure that, for the present, I am entitled to your payment. I am hoping," he concluded, "that our future relations may be such that financial matters between us become unimportant."

Felix Dukane relaxed so far as to smile.

"I give you credit for persistence, Mr. Van Stratton," he admitted. "It is an excellent quality. Lunch with us to-day."

"I shall be delighted," Mark accepted promptly. "And now that I am once more alone with you, Mr. Dukane, may I take advantage of the opportunity to ask you to consent to your daughter's engagement to me?"

"Do you imagine that she wants to marry you?" Dukane asked, regarding almost defiantly his prospective son-in-law.

"I think she is beginning to," Mark replied. "Very soon she will be perfectly willing."

Felix Dukane stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Do you know that my daughter is the greatest heiress in the world?" he enquired.

"I am not surprised to hear it," Mark rejoined indifferently. "In a sense it doesn't interest me. For all

ordinary purposes of life I myself am sufficiently wealthy."

"Still," Mr. Dukane continued, "the possession of very great wealth entails certain obligations. My daughter's dowry, not to speak of what she will inherit at my death, might well be the equivalent of the national debt of some of these small kingdoms. I have practically made up my mind, as she has already told you, that she shall marry Prince Andropulo of Drome."

"A horrible fellow!" Mark observed pleasantly. "She may toy with the idea for a time, but I am perfectly certain she could never marry him."

"You appear to be a young man who knows his own mind," Mr. Dukane remarked.

"I am," Mark assented.

"I share that quality. When an idea enters my brain and appeals to me, I generally carry it out. I intend my daughter to marry Prince Andropulo."

"That may be your present intention," Mark ventured, "but it is your daughter who would have to marry him and not you. I don't think for a moment, when the time came, that she would ever consent."

"You think not," Dukane countered grimly. "Well, we shall see. You can lunch with us, anyway. I am in your debt. Frankly I admit that. You are temporarily out of pocket two hundred and fifty thousand pounds on my account. As you have given your word you will, I presume, have to remain in that position for the present, and I don't see what there is I can offer you beyond a luncheon. You can come out and visit us all in the East later on if you like."

"Estelle and I will not be living in the East," Mark confided. "I rather thought of a *pied à terre* in Paris, a villa in Cannes, a flat somewhere near here, or perhaps keep on my *maisonnette* in Curzon Street, and a real Eng-

lish country house. I have an idea that Estelle might like to hunt."

"She will be able to hunt wild boar in the Andropulo forests," her father remarked drily. "By the bye, have you been to Whitehall this morning?"

"I am on my way there now."

"Bring me word at luncheon time if there is any news," Dukane begged. "There's a rumour that the Conference will present its decision to the Premier this afternoon and that the figures will be announced to-night or to-morrow morning."

"If there is any news which is common property, sir," Mark promised, "I will bring it to you."

Mark met his Chief upon the steps of the Embassy; Mr. Huventhayer, although he was spick and span as usual and smoking his customary cigar, was showing signs of the strain of the last few weeks. There were unusual lines at the corners of his mouth, a slight weariness of expression. He greeted Mark with a pleasant little nod.

"You'll find a summons inside for Whitehall at four o'clock," he said. "Mr. Hugerson told me to be sure and see that you were there as he wants to pack up some papers."

"That looks as though we were getting near the end, sir," Mark observed.

"I shouldn't wonder," the Ambassador confided, "if this weren't the last meeting."

"You mean that they may finish to-night?" Mark demanded eagerly.

Mr. Huventhayer nodded deliberately.

"If nothing goes wrong," he replied—"and I firmly hope that nothing will—there is no reason why it shouldn't be over within a few hours. It would have been over yesterday but the Frenchmen for some reason or

other have seemed feverishly anxious to keep it open. We have had to fight them all along, of course, but I can't see that there's anything more they can do about it. Are you lunching, Mark?"

"Not to-day sir."

"Well, go in for a minute. I think that Madame wants to see you. By the bye, what about Dukane?"

"He's all right, sir, I think," Mark answered. "I have just left him."

Mr. Huventhayer stroked his chin.

"They say that if Germany accepts our figures, as she is pledged to do, Dukane has the control of a vast sum of money for her first loan, and that he is going to back her afterwards with every million he possesses. If he does, he'll be a richer man than either Rockefeller or Ford before he dies. See you later, Mark."

Mark found a couple of unimportant letters in his room, his summons to Whitehall at four o'clock, and a list of American visitors to London upon whose social position Mrs. Huventhayer required a report. As soon as he had concluded his task he made his way to the boudoir. Myra, just in from riding, was talking to her mother.

"Enter Mark, exhausted from his morning's work!" she exclaimed. "Mummie, can we have cocktails? I had scarcely any breakfast and such a gallop, and that poor young man looks worn out. Why are you so pale, Mark?" she went on, as she rang the bell. "Is it true that Estelle Dukane is going to marry Prince Andropulo?"

"I don't think so," Mark replied cheerfully. "I have an idea that she is going to marry me some day."

"We Americans don't suffer from lack of nerves," Myra laughed. "They say that Estelle is to be a queen, and Mr. Dukane a sort of comic prime minister. I've

been riding with your friend Lord Dorchester. He seems rather depressed about it too."

"You'll have to console one of us if the worst comes to the worst, Myra," Mark warned her.

"Yes, but the question is which?" she pointed out. "Are you lunching?"

"Not to-day."

"What a pity!" she sighed. "Lord Dorchester is coming and I should have liked to have seen you together. One can judge so much better."

"I'm lunching with my future father-in-law," Mark confided.

"Does he know about that prospective relationship?" she scoffed.

"Well, I've told him so. I'll admit he seems a little sceptical," Mark admitted. "Still, one must have confidence."

The cocktails arrived, and with them Mr. Huventhayer. He carried some official despatches in his hand.

"Any news, Dad?" Myra enquired.

"Nothing for general circulation," he replied, "except that I have an intimation here that the French delegate who had demanded a delay admitted this morning that he has nothing fresh to bring before the Conference. Lord Idrington asks me, therefore, to be present this afternoon, as in all probability we shall be required to sign the report."

"Stay and celebrate with us, Mark," Mrs. Huventhayer invited.

Mark shook his head regretfully.

"Thank you very much, but I have a little celebration elsewhere," he confessed.

CHAPTER XXXI

Mark, finding a luncheon party of four, with Prince Andropulo the other guest, did his best, not altogether successfully, to conceal his disappointment. Estelle rested her fingers upon his arm as they passed from the salon into the smaller dining room and whispered confidentially in his ear.

"He called on some business and Father asked him to stay. You don't mind?"

"Not if he leaves directly afterwards," Mark replied glumly. "I want to talk to you."

"I'll do my best," she promised.

After that, luncheon became a more cheerful meal. The four of them sat at a round table upon which were a centrepiece of priceless lace, blue glass of Venetian pattern, and a great bowl of blue hyacinths. Prince Andropulo fully reciprocated and even exceeded Mark's own lack of cordiality. Felix Dukane, on the other hand, showed most unusual signs of civility, almost of affability.

"A young man like you," he said to Mark, during the progress of the meal, "with a clever father and grandfather behind him, ought to take up finance."

"I will, sir, if you will make me a partner," Mark suggested.

Estelle laughed softly. Even her father smiled.

"I might consider it," he observed—"on terms."

"Finance in these days," Prince Andropulo intervened in his rather guttural voice, "requires brains and technical knowledge of figures."

"You are not, I believe, a financier?" Mark enquired politely.

"I am the ruler of my country," the Prince answered with some stiffness. "At present its affairs are being administered by a delegate but I expect to be recalled at any moment."

"The Prince's return to his country," Mr. Dukane explained, "is purely a matter of finance. By the bye, Prince, you may be interested to know that I have received further reports this morning as to the oil fields on the western side of the Kratlin Forests. The reports are on the whole exceedingly favourable."

"There is oil enough in Drome," Prince Andropulo declared confidently, "to make it one of the richest countries for its size in the world. It needs two things only —capital and brains!"

"And a stable government," Mr. Dukane added—"a stable and popular government—one in which the people have confidence."

"That is also a vital necessity," the Prince agreed.

"I wonder whether one would ever feel really safe in one of those far Eastern countries—Drome, for instance?" Estelle speculated.

"Safe!" the Prince repeated, with a contraction of his eyebrows which was almost a scowl. "I do not quite comprehend."

"Well, they none of them seem to have absolutely settled down since the war, do they?" she ventured. "They are always changing their governments, having revolutions, and that sort of thing. Even you are practically exiled."

"I should scarcely consider my absence from Drome in that light," the Prince declared coldly. "I am asked by the Prime Minister of my country to travel abroad for some months in order to stop socialistic machinations

against the Constitution. It is perfectly understood that Drome will be mine again as soon as the present crisis is passed. If five months ago," he went on striking the table with his fist, "I could have found the money to pay the army and to have bought the two gunboats Turkey offered to us, there would never have been any question of my leaving the palace. It is a humiliating but true confession that in Drome to-day money is our direst necessity. We have virgin forests, priceless timber with waterways to carry it to the sea, salt mines which have never been touched, millions of acres of oil-producing lands which have scarcely even been tested, copper and tin mines waiting only for machinery,—yet we are paralysed. All the gold of the world has passed across the seas westward. America has drained us dry. And when she sends her speculators to prospect they demand from my people options on ridiculous terms, options which would mean that all the wealth which naturally and geographically belongs to my country must go back to the greediest land on earth for her eternal aggrandisement. No, I wait. I wait for other things."

"I am an American," Mark observed.

"So I have always understood," Prince Andropulo rejoined briefly.

Mark leaned forward but he met Estelle's beseeching glance and held his peace.

"The other things may come," Dukane said thoughtfully. "Meanwhile, unless some unexpected tragedy occurs to wreck the great work which the Conference has accomplished, Europe is in for a great revival. The statesmen of the world are beginning to realise that a moribund Germany is a moribund Europe. If Germany struggles now to her feet and starts her great task, money will flow once more and trade all over the world will flourish. I confess myself an optimist."

Luncheon had reached its final stage and the cigarettes were passed around. Prince Andropulo and Mr. Dukane began to discuss some question of the national debt of Drome. Estelle rose suddenly and touched Mark upon the arm.

"Come with me," she invited. "I am bored with the national debt of Drome. They can come in for their coffee when they are ready."

She led him away, regardless of Andropulo's frown of annoyance. They passed through the anteroom into a further apartment, a room which had been the boudoir of one of the former ladies of the house—a room about which, in the midst of an intense modernity, there still hung a faint flavour of Victorianism, with water colours upon the papered walls and stiff but not ungraceful furniture. Estelle laughed up at her companion.

"Well," she asked, "are you grateful? Are you going to leave off being angry with me?"

"You are wonderful," he acknowledged warmly. "There is only one thing you can do more—promise to marry me."

"I really think I shall some day," she confided. "Of course, I should rather like to be a queen."

"With Andropulo for king!" Mark scoffed. "Ridiculous!"

"Still," she persisted, "the crown jewels are really very wonderful."

"I'll buy them for you," he suggested. "Andropulo looks the sort of man who would sell anything."

She laughed.

"They will not let them go out of the palace, or I expect he would have pawned them before. So we are really coming to the end of these wonderful weeks. This afternoon is to finish it."

"I believe so," he replied. "The Frenchmen have been

keeping the thing going, hoping—well, we know for what. Lord Idrington has given them a little extra time, but I think he has made up his mind now to finish. Estelle, your father and Andropulo will be here directly. You know, just as you look now, you're the sweetest thing on earth. I've got to tell you so—got to beg you to be just a little kind."

They had been leaning against the back of a couch and she came a step nearer to him. For a single moment she rested resistless in his arms. His lips touched hers passionately. Then she glided away. There were sounds of movement in the other room.

"Don't be too impatient, please," she begged very softly. "I'll tell you something if you like. Then you can judge for yourself. I have never let any one do that before you—that afternoon in the taxicab. I never wanted to."

"Not even Andropulo?" he laughed happily.

She made a little grimace from her chair beside the coffee tray. A footman entered with liqueurs and the voices of Mr. Dukane and the Prince were audible as they approached. They were still talking as they entered the room.

"To pay the back interest on the government bonds," Andropulo was saying eagerly, "would take little more than a matter of three millions at the present rate of exchange. It would create an unheard-of wave of patriotism and of loyalty towards the Government throughout the country. My people are loyal enough," he went on, "but they have been near to starvation. The dynasty which can show them the land of plenty is going to be the dynasty which they will accept and to which they will adhere."

"Sounds interesting—very interesting," Felix Dukane confessed, as he stirred his coffee. "I have at odd times

controlled some of the greatest industrial enterprises in the world, some whose capital ran into almost incredible figures, but an entire kingdom, a taxable kingdom, with undeveloped resources and a national debt to deal with, is an absolutely new problem. I contemplate it, Prince, with pleasure. Wait only one week for my definite reply. You have seen your Chief this morning, Mr. Van Stratton?"

"For a few minutes only," Mark replied.

"He had anything to say?"

"His view is that the figures will be submitted to the Prime Minister this afternoon and handed to the Press this evening."

Dukane nodded slowly.

"It will be good," he declared. "All the cables of the world seem to have been buzzing into my business room this morning. The strain of the last few weeks—I do not often speak of these things—has been great. I shall be glad when it is over and I can have a rest."

Mark glanced across the room to where Prince Andropulo was bending over Estelle.

"Don't get too interested in that country of Andropulo's, sir," Mark begged.

"I am very interested in it indeed," was the almost dogged reply. "Don't you get building on the impossible, young man."

"Nothing is impossible if we want it badly enough, sir," Mark pronounced.

Felix Dukane stood squarely on his feet for a moment with his hands clasped behind him and his underlip protruding. He had the appearance of one about to make a pronouncement.

"Young man," he said, "what the people of your country need is a setback. You cannot believe that there is anything in the world you can't have. By following a

safe policy for the last fifteen years you have become the richest and the most powerful country in the world. You have sent every exchange in Europe rocky because you have stored away all the gold. Your women have come over here and allied themselves with all the great names in England, France and Italy, and now you come and coolly tell me that you intend to marry my daughter —the greatest heiress in the world. I don't like young men, as a rule, Van Stratton. I rather like you, but I'm damned if you're going to play your country's game and help yourself to everything for which you have a fancy. Now go away. I have business to attend to."

Notwithstanding his somewhat abrupt dismissal, Mark made his adieux with almost a light heart, for Estelle had smiled upon him once more as he had bowed over her fingers.

CHAPTER XXXII

There was a tense atmosphere that afternoon in the whole of Whitehall. The time had passed when even the brief visits of secretaries and shorthand writers to the Conference chamber were necessary, and the doors were closely locked. It was understood that the last few moments of discussion had arrived, to be followed at any instant by the final vote, and in the various suites of rooms outside, amongst the secretaries and other officials, there was a sympathetic atmosphere of excitement reflected to some extent in the large apartment given over to select representatives of the Press, who would presently receive from the hands of Lord Idrington himself the long-awaited decision. Mark, wandering restlessly about, found his way to Frances Moreland's room. He discovered her sitting idly before her typewriter, her great eyes fixed upon the little strip of river just visible between a gap in the buildings. She welcomed him without a smile. He almost fancied indeed that she shivered at the sound of his voice.

"Well," he said, "we're in at the death. You must be rather glad. You've had so much more of it than I've had."

"Yes, I'm glad," she admitted. "In a few minutes I shall put the cover upon my typewriter and finish—for good, I hope."

"You're giving up work?"

She nodded.

"I'm going to be married to Sidney Howlett in a few weeks."

"Well, that's good news," he declared cheerfully. "I hope I'll get asked to the wedding."

"You'd hate it," she assured him. "Sidney has quite a lot of relatives and we're going to be married from Crouch End."

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "If you don't send me an invitation, you'll never hear the end of it."

She smiled for the first time, a little wanly, and turned towards him. Her fingers strayed to the box of cigarettes at her side. She lit one, leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs.

"Mr. Van Stratton," she said, "you always seem to me to be full of robust common sense. I want you to help me."

"Why, give me a chance," he invited.

"A problem has come into my life—something that is always bothering me. I cannot make up my mind exactly how much one owes to oneself and one's happiness as against, say, the ordinary scheme of conduct, one's subscription to the everyday morality of life."

"Make it as simple as you can," he begged.

"In order to make my marriage possible," she continued, "I committed an unmoral action. I won't specify it. I will not say whether it was theft, or what. It was without a doubt a wrong and wicked thing to do, and I did it. If I hadn't, I should probably never have been married. I should have lost any little chance of happiness which might ever have come to me in life. I was a long time making up my mind," she went on thoughtfully. "I know so many people who seem to have led absolutely good lives and found no reward—women of my own age who have lived respectably and nicely, helped other people, and now have to face an old age of loneliness. I suppose I was wrong. I came to the deliberate conclusion that an over-rigid subscription to the moralities

of life brings no reward in this world, and I haven't, alas! faith in any other."

"Every code of morals must be more or less elastic," Mark declared, after a moment's reflection. "If you could do a great deal of good to yourself, and a little harm in other ways, I shouldn't hesitate. After all, as a happy woman you're an asset to the world. Your own happiness does good to others as well as to yourself. There is always that point of view to be considered."

"It's rather a comforting point of view," she acknowledged.

He seated himself for a moment upon the edge of her table.

"It's sane enough," he contended, "and you want to tack on to it just one thread of philosophy. If you've counted the cost and done a thing, wipe out doubts. You can't alter it. It's done. Take what's coming to you."

She smiled.

"I knew I should find it a relief to talk to you," she said. "I shall lay hold of that thread as hard as I can. All my life," she went on, "I shall suffer just a little. On the other hand, I know that I shall often be happy. I would rather have the mixture than the grey days."

"Stick to that," he advised. "You're dead right!"

He took her hand in his, resisting at that moment his desire to tell her the truth. Suddenly the sound for which every one in the building was waiting travelled out from the Council Chamber—the low rumbling of a gong. Immediately every door round the great corridor was thrown open and the passage was thronged with an eager little crowd. Mark and Frances joined in the stampede. They were in time to hear the sound of the turning of the key in the great door, to see it swung open and the figure of Lord Idrington standing there. He made a

little sign to his secretary who hurried up to him.

"The Conference has arrived at a decision," he announced, "to which every member has now subscribed. Those gentlemen of the Press, whose names my secretary has, are invited to enter the Chamber and receive the information which we are prepared to give."

He withdrew at once and his secretary, with a list in his hand, called up by name the waiting journalists. A few disappointed ones were waved back. Then once more the door was closed and locked. There was a little buzz of interest amongst those who remained outside. Mark and Frances Moreland sat upon a settee together.

"I wonder whether it is all a dream," she reflected; "whether the world peace has really come? One thought so at Versailles. Perhaps this will be another disappointment."

"It depends upon the spirit in which the Germans sign this time," he said. "So far as one knows, they have made up their minds to pay. They have realised that it is their best policy."

The door of the Conference Chamber was opened and shut abruptly. The chief German delegate walked out. He was looking pale and there was a curious glitter in his eyes. He recognised his secretary amongst the little group of loiterers and paused.

"You had better come with me to the Embassy, Carl," he directed. "I have a despatch to draft."

"In one moment, sir."

The young man hurried off for his hat and coat. His Chief lit a cigarette whilst he waited and spoke to an acquaintance.

"All fixed up this time, Baron?" the latter enquired.

"This time all is arranged," Felderling answered gravely. "The mandate of the country is behind our signatures. It is a terrible thing which Germany has

to face, but she will do it. So she shall achieve her destiny."

Mark glanced after the figure of the departing German delegate and turned to Frances.

"Achieve her destiny!" he repeated. "I wonder what the Frenchmen will have to say about that?"

Presently the doors were once more thrown open. The journalists came hurrying out in advance, and in a moment or two the figures were being whispered about. Mr. Huventhayer was the first member of the Conference to make his appearance. He took Mark's arm and led him away. It was noticeable that, mingled with a certain air of relief which every one showed at the finish of their labours, there was also an impression of gravity.

"I suppose," Mr. Huventhayer said, as they descended the broad stairs, "all the world will applaud us tomorrow. I wish I hadn't the feeling somehow, Mark, that we are letting a mad dog loose upon the world again."

"That's what the Frenchmen think, sir," Mark reminded him.

"I don't know that I blame them," his Chief sighed. "Payment is going to be made easy for them. They have a great loan coming, and they have a specially drafted Income Tax which will touch their capitalists severely, but there will be no real impoverishment of the country. It's my impression that they'll pay practically out of income. The French have to leave the Ruhr almost at once."

"How much, sir?" Mark asked.

The Ambassador looked around to be sure that they were alone.

"We have to let these gentlemen of the Press be first with the news," he explained. "Four and a half thousand million in twelve years, the first instalment in cash.

Wonderful securities too; the railways, customs, bonds and a special Income Tax collected by a mixed committee. When they once made up their mind to pay, they made the thing easy enough. Are you coming to the Embassy, Mark?"

"I thought I'd look in for a minute, sir, in case there was anything to do," Mark replied.

The chauffeur was holding open the door of the car. His Chief beckoned Mark to enter.

"There was just one thing, especially in the concluding stages," Mr. Huventhayer remarked, as they drove off, "which made us all a trifle uneasy. Instead of drawing back and howling and groaning as they generally do, the people who were the most anxious to have the thing settled were the Germans. They are paying quite as much as any one ever thought and they have given wonderful guarantees. Yet they were in a perfect fever to sign."

"Was there ever a rumour," Mark asked, "or an idea that there were some sort of disclosures floating about which might have stiffened the backs of the Conference?"

"I never heard anything of the sort," Mr. Huventhayer answered, "and it's too late now, at any rate. The Conference papers are signed. A meeting of the League of Nations is called for Wednesday week. Glad I'm not one of that body. They'll have trouble facing them from the start."

"What sort of trouble?" Mark enquired.

His Chief hesitated.

"It's an open secret," he confided, "that France is only awaiting the result of the Conference to enter upon an enormous air programme."

"But how's that?" Mark queried. "She is a member of the League. They're all tied down, aren't they?"

"They're tied down right enough," Mr. Huventhayer

admitted, "but I heard an almost official declaration this morning that sooner than abandon her plans France will leave the League. Monsieur Parrian, the senior of the French delegates, said frankly in the Conference chamber when he signed that he considered France had been forced into this Conference and that the hand of every nation was against her. Both he and Lavaltine, the other delegate, were almost in tears."

"What do you think about it all, sir?" Mark ventured.

His Chief's expression was grave.

"It's hard to make up one's mind, Mark," he admitted. "You see I can't ignore the fact that a large number of our most respected citizens are Germans by birth and it is very largely through their influence that we came into this Conference. Things couldn't be left as they were, anyhow, but I do prophesy that now we've brought Germany back amongst the nations hers will be the most marvellous recuperation the world has ever known."

"No one would grudge her that, sir," Mark observed, "but what I'd like to know is, do you think she's going to make an honest attempt to live peacefully with her neighbours, or is she going to give herself up once more to this blasted militarism? If I believed that—"

Mark stopped abruptly. Mr. Huventhayer appeared not to notice the break in his sentence.

"I can't tell you, Mark," the latter confessed. "All I do know is that if the military party ever get the upper hand in Germany, there will follow the bloodiest war that has ever been waged. Personally—and this you must consider as spoken within the walls of the Embassy, Mark—I think that, having forced France into the Conference, we should give her guarantees jointly with England. That I think would only be an act of justice and it might avoid a hideous catastrophe. England would be perfectly willing to join without hesitation, but the

trouble with us is that even if our present Government acquiesced, long before the war was due we should have a different cabinet and a different popular opinion."

"It would be the greatest and most philanthropic act of statesmanship any American Government had ever brought off," Mark declared enthusiastically. "I wish we could get them to see it so."

"I am writing my views to the President," Mr. Huventhayer confided, "but even if he were converted himself he would have a tremendous task to get the thing through the Senate. You see, popular opinion in the States never approved of France's excursion into the Ruhr. It was a great conception in its way, and a spectacular achievement whilst it lasted, but it sowed the seeds of a hatred amongst the Germans which I am afraid it will take generations to dissipate. No clear-sighted person could imagine that France ever thought that she was going to benefit herself financially by it. She simply did it to weaken Germany. She retarded any possible military preparations for a year or two without a doubt, but she did herself a great deal of harm with popular opinion in America. Why, look at these lads! New York couldn't beat this!"

Newsboys with filled satchels upon their backs, bent double over their bicycles, were threading their way here and there with incredible skill through the traffic. Upon the backs of all of them were flaunted great placards on which appeared only the figures—

£4,500,000,000.

CHAPTER XXXIII

The Press of the world, with the solitary exception of France, adopted upon the following morning an exuberant and enthusiastic tone with regard to the result of the Conference. Its successful termination and the acceptance of its verdict by Germany were spoken of as being the greatest events which had occurred since the signing of the Armistice. America, in self-congratulatory fashion, reminded every one that it was she who had made the Conference practical and possible by consenting to send delegates to it. England almost too boldly welcomed the war of commercial rivalry now about to ensue. The smaller European countries were almost hysterical in their enthusiasm. France alone refused to participate in the rejoicings, pointing out with a gravity which was almost ominous that in accepting the findings of the Conference and withdrawing her troops from the Ruhr, she was yielding to the will of the majority, was abandoning her own principles and to a great extent her security for the sake of her loyalty to the Allies. Her leader writers invoked their country to seek boldly and firmly the guarantees to which she was entitled in return for her generosity. One leading morning paper made no effort to shirk the issue at which the others hinted. "The yielding of France," its editor pronounced, "as evidenced by the signatures of our representatives to the agreement concluded at the Conference of London yesterday brings nearer by some ten years the next great world war. It imposes upon France the necessity for commencing

without delay to arm herself for the inevitable struggle. France stands in peril to-day of losing through weak statesmanship the security for which millions of her sons have given their lives."

Then, before people had put aside the morning papers, came the dramatic announcement by the midday Press that the great firm of Felix Dukane and Company had guaranteed a loan to Germany, jointly with half a dozen American banks, of a thousand million pounds, which was to provide for the cash payment of the whole of the first instalment. The evening papers almost neglected the great work of the Conference in eulogy of this, the most wonderful loan ever engineered by the genius of one man. The Rothschilds and Morgans of the world had become pigmies. Felix Dukane was beyond the shadow of a doubt the greatest financier the world had ever known. There were sketches of his career to be found on every printed page, stories of his eccentricities, surmises as to his wealth, lavish praise of the beauty and charm of his only daughter, with many hints as to the forthcoming announcement of her marriage to a royal prince. Mark, reading it all in his car on the way back from the Embassy, smiled as he threw the paper away from him. Estelle's kindness to him had steadily grown, and with it his confidence. There had been a hint of a meeting within twenty-four hours. That meeting, he promised himself, should bring him the one little word he needed to confirm his happiness. He entered the house to find Robert holding on to the telephone.

"A lady wishes to speak to you, sir," he announced. "I heard the car stop, so I told her you were just arriving. You are switched through to the library."

Mark hurried there without stopping to remove his overcoat. In reply to his tentative "Hello" Estelle's voice came drifting over the wire.

"Do you know that you have been keeping me waiting disgracefully?" she complained.

"I had to spend the morning at the Embassy and I have only just returned," he explained eagerly. "Shall I come round and apologise? I was just going to ring you up."

"I wish you could," she answered, "but I am being taken to a stupid tea. I do not wish to go but it is necessary. Would you like to come and dine?"

"Should I like to dine?" he repeated ecstatically. "What time?"

"Half-past eight. There will be rather a crowd of people, but fortunately there is just room for a well-mannered young man who is something of a conversationalist and can flirt with his next-door neighbour if she desires it. I thought of you at once."

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "Wouldn't it be a good opportunity to announce our engagement?"

"Am I going to have that sort of trouble with you to-night?" she asked, with mock severity.

"Why call it trouble?" he protested. "When a thing has to be done why not face it?"

"But I thought I told you yesterday," she reminded him, "that Father is very ungracious about it all. He still thinks he wants to be Prince Andropulo's Chancellor of the Exchequer and make a hobby of his country."

"Why not, if it amuses him?" Mark rejoined. "We will go and see him for a fortnight every year. You won't want to stay longer. It's a beastly uncomfortable country and a wretched climate. My programme is best: Cannes and Egypt in the winter, Paris for a month in the spring, and England for the summer, with a little hunting to finish up with."

"It does sound rather attractive," she admitted. "Perhaps Father will be in a good humour to-night. Now

I am going to ring off. You can talk about your plans for the future to Sybil Loftus at dinner. She will be your next-door neighbour. It is quite time she was married, and I think she likes you."

"The Prince will be looking for some consolation soon," Mark observed. "Why not throw them together?"

Estelle, with a little laugh, terminated the conversation. Mark turned away with a satisfied smile and took off his overcoat. The world seemed a very wonderful place just then. On his way to the door he met Robert announcing a visitor.

"The Marquis de Fontanay is here, sir."

Mark was for the moment completely taken aback.

"The devil!" he murmured. "You mean that he has called, that he is actually here?"

"He is in the hall, sir. He preferred to wait there until I had announced him."

Mark hesitated. He was never afterwards able to account for the singular reluctance with which he gave the obvious order.

"Show him in," he directed.

If there was any animosity mingled with Mark's surprise, it vanished at once as soon as Raoul de Fontanay crossed the threshold. With his pallid complexion and deep-set eyes he had never been a strong-looking man, but his appearance now was almost ghastly. His cheeks seemed to have fallen in. There were faint violet lines under his eyes, a depressing lifelessness about his tone and manner.

"You consent to receive me then?" he asked pathetically.

Mark had forgotten all his resentment. He gripped his friend by the hand.

"Don't be an idiot, Raoul!" he exclaimed, wheeling forward an armchair. "You played the game all right,

even though I was the victim. Nothing fresh wrong, I hope?"

"Everything is wrong," De Fontanay replied, as he sank into the chair a little wearily. "The mockery of these rejoicings is driving me mad. I believe they are going to illuminate the streets here to-night. Every city in Europe except Paris is to be *en fête*. It is ghastly! Incredible!"

"See here, Raoul," Mark reasoned, "this business has got on your nerves. You've got a distorted idea of it all. Even if Germany becomes once more a rich and powerful country, you've no proof that she means to play the 'mad dog' again. I should think she learnt her lesson last time. In the years of compulsory peace we have before us diplomacy ought to be able to do something."

"Diplomacy!" De Fontanay scoffed. "Who is there to exercise it? What form will it take? What answer is there to the millions of Russians busy training, to Germany already breaking every pledge, prepared the moment she has paid that first thousand million to break every other one, to bid defiance once more to the world? You're a nice fellow to talk about diplomacy, Mark—you, whose word—"

He broke off in his speech and Mark nodded sympathetically.

"That's all right, old chap," he acknowledged. "I'll admit that our policy has never been framed on generous lines so far as regards the rest of the world. We mind our business at home perhaps just a little more than we should, but I tell you frankly that I can't see anything in the situation to account for your taking the worst for granted in this way."

De Fontanay unfastened his coat, from the breast-pocket of which he produced a little sheaf of papers.

"I do not suppose that these would interest you," he said bitterly. "After all, it is another country, not yours, whose destruction is planned. Nevertheless, for my conscience's sake, you shall read them—you who might have broken up that Conference and shown the world the deceit and perfidy of the country which she is reëstablishing."

Mark moved uneasily in his place and stretched out his hands for the papers.

"Something fresh?" he asked a little lamely.

"These reached me yesterday," De Fontanay went on. "Forty-eight hours too late! They are copies, of course, but I have all the originals. I have the original letter signed by the President. All the Bavarian figures can be proved up to the hilt. The War Staff hold their meetings every fortnight in a small town in Bavaria, and there are twenty-five million members of the 1940 Society. By 1940, as you will see, France is to exist no longer."

Mark glanced through the papers, casually enough at first, then with an interest which became graver and more concentrated with every line he read."

"These," De Fontanay went on, "are the result of a year's work by Victor de Fayenne, Colonel de Fayenne's brother. They must carry conviction because they are true."

Mark looked up for a moment with a troubled face.

"Do you mean to tell me that this proclamation from the President to the 1940 Society is genuine?" he exclaimed. "It seems incredible."

"I have in my possession," De Fontanay declared passionately, "the original letter written in the President's own handwriting. Fifty copies of it were made, each one to be read at the different headquarters. When they were read they were destroyed. De Fayenne has the

phonograph record of one read in Berlin. He also has the pieces of another joined together and, as you see, the original letter. It is a further proof of the consummate hypocrisy of the Germans. In all his public utterances, the President abjures the military spirit, yet William of Hohenzollern never produced a more mischievous document than that address of his to the young men of Germany. It might have come from his own pen."

Mark read on with an absorbed air, his expression all the time becoming more troubled. When he had finished he was silent for several moments.

"It is true, you will see, what Foch himself pointed out," De Fontanay went on, "that there are no conditions, no possible restrictions which can be imposed upon Germany to prevent her preparing for the coming war. All she needs to do is to train her young men, and she can do that in gymnasiums and athletic associations and student corps just as well as in the military camps, as you will see by those papers she is doing. Year by year now she will become more independent, will brook less interference. In five years' time, as the President himself impudently pronounces, she will be openly training her armies for the war of revenge."

"This all seems very convincing, I must confess," Mark acknowledged. "It is a very terrible state of affairs, Raoul. Of course, you are going to make use of this information even though the Conference is over?"

"Naturally," was the somewhat weary reply. "but what good do you suppose we will do, now that the agreement is signed, and the whole world seems to embrace the idea that Germany's rehabilitation means the salvation of Europe. Germany will explain. We may get an excited Press for a day or two. The President may possibly resign. If he does, he will retain a place

in the Cabinet and his successor will be the same type of man. Then everything will simmer down. A commission may be appointed. The Germans are the cleverest people in the world at dealing with commissions."

"Why did you bring these papers to me, Raoul, of all people in the world?" Mark asked his friend, a little abruptly.

"With a very faint and lingering hope," De Fontanay explained. "If they had come into my possession forty-eight hours ago, I believe that my appeal to you would not have been in vain. You would have understood more clearly the terrible risk of freeing Germany, and you would have joined your evidence to mine. Still, the issue is so tremendous that I cling to the slightest chance. I believe that if, coupled with the production of these proofs of Germany's political perfidy, Brennan's disclosures could also be made use of, something might yet be effected to nullify to some extent the harm which the Conference has done."

Mark helped himself to a whisky and soda from the sideboard. He offered the decanter to his visitor, who shook his head.

"Mark," the latter went on, "our friendship began in the thunder of battle and it has been sanctified by blood. I have made one appeal to you, and failed. This time I am in a stronger position. Here between us we have proof of Germany's intention to break her pledges and turn the world once more into a shambles. The disclosures which I am able to make might not, alone, stop the march of events, but coupled with those other and still more damning evidences of her perfidy, which I am convinced that you have in your possession, I believe that we could still upset this insane compact. You are holding up that evidence at a woman's bidding, Mark. Are you justified?"

Mark's face was furrowed. He seemed to have grown older.

"It isn't only that, Raoul," he muttered. "I honestly believed that Brennan's disclosures, whatever they may amount to, were better held up for the present. Their production would only have broken up the Conference, and Europe would have sunk back into disorder. I honestly did not believe that the Germany of to-day was capable of such a lapse into militarism."

De Fontanay leaned forward in his chair. His eyes were unnaturally brilliant, his speech a little difficult. A bright spot of colour burned upon his cheeks. His lips were as tremulous as a woman's.

"Mark," he said, "the history of the world is made and changed sometimes in strange places, in a strange fashion, and by unknown people. It is a great decision which rests with you now. Join your evidence with mine and we at least face the world with cleaner consciences. Ask yourself, as a man of honour, are you justified in shielding the miscreants of a country which as I have proved to you to-day contemplates unspeakable infamy? Are you justified, Mark? You will be a young man still in twelve or fifteen years. What shall you think of yourself when you hear the mutterings of the storm, when you think of the millions of lives, the broken homes, the ruin and misery of that next Great War? You have the evidences of what Germany intends. I want you to see, Mark, that you have as great a responsibility towards humanity as I to my country."

Mark walked over to the window and stood there silent for a moment or two looking out. Already his decision was taken, although with it much of the buoyance of life seemed to have left him. Presently he turned around.

"I guess you're right, Raoul," he admitted. "Bren-

nan's box shall be opened here at twelve o'clock to-night, in your presence and Dukane's."

De Fontanay crossed the room with uncertain footsteps. His eyes were filled with tears which he made no effort to conceal. He passed his arm through Mark's with all the gentleness of a woman. From under his breath for a moment there came a faint reminiscence of that far-away tune.

"If you should have to face a great sorrow for this, dear friend," he said, "think sometimes of the innocent lives you may save, and the women's hearts you may keep from breaking."

CHAPTER XXXIV

Mark, with a heavy heart and oppressed with a numbed sense of unreality, found himself one of a brilliant gathering that night. From the first he was flattered, even though he was tortured by the kindliness of Estelle's greeting, the little half-pressure of the fingers she gave him, the pleasant way in which she introduced him to those of the assembled guests with whom he was unacquainted. Even Felix Dukane was for him almost genial, accepting Mark's presence with resignation, if not with enthusiasm. Mark realised with a pang which tore at his very heartstrings that his invitation that night was not altogether so casual as it had seemed. There was a pleasant though indefinite note of familiarity in Estelle's manner, a faint air of proprietorship, which a few hours ago would have filled him with joy and confidence. The Prince, too, was an absent guest. Mark commented upon the fact as Estelle showed him a little plan of the table, standing upon an ivory easel.

"Ought I to have asked him instead of you?" she whispered. "Somehow I thought not—now—and Father gave in quite good-naturedly, when I insisted."

"You wanted me?" he managed to ask.

"It rather looks like it," she confessed, turning away to welcome the last guests.

At dinner time Mark was conscious of contributing his quota to the conversation with almost unimaginable mechanicalness. Although Felix Dukane himself rather

avoided the subject, few people found it possible to talk of anything else except the flotation of their host's amazing loan. The magnitude of the figures had touched people's imagination. And with it all every one was in excellent spirits. A famous bishop who had lost some of his following during the war through his ardent militarism was eloquent enough now in commendation of the work of the Conference.

"It is neither politically wise, nor it is in accordance with the doctrines of religion," he pronounced, "to keep alive unnecessary hatred. The signing of a treaty of peace should do more than set on paper the material conditions of its administration. It should be the duty of all to forget as speedily as possible the violent and unnatural feelings which war excites in the nature of man. All nations have their quota of qualities, bad and good, but we are, after all, fellow stock, of one common humanity. To keep alive an evil feeling is bad for us and bad for the world. That is why I for one rejoice in the reestablishment of Germany."

"It is also," a great banker remarked, "an economic error for the victor not to help the vanquished. Each needs the other in this world."

"That sort of thing is all very well," his neighbour, Lady Sylvia, whispered to Mark, "but I notice that there are no French guests here to-night. We may be all members of a common humanity, as the Bishop tells us, but it is of no use ignoring the fact that there is such a thing as racial animosity. It doesn't exist between Germany and England because we are practically of the same race, but I can't imagine any real community of feeling between Germany and France. The Latin and the Teuton can no more lie down together than the lion and the lamb. Tell me what do you Americans think about it all?"

"I am not a politician," Mark replied.

"But you are a diplomat, aren't you?" she enquired.

"A diplomat is not allowed to talk politics at the dinner tables," he reminded her discreetly.

She laughed.

"Then I will tell you of a string of polo ponies I know of down in Norfolk," she suggested—"none of them up to your weight, I am afraid, but wonderful animals all of them."

Dinner passed cheerfully on to its appointed end; cheerfully as regards the majority of the guests, even though to Mark it was almost a nightmare. Felix Dukane, although not loquacious, proved himself an adequate host, and Estelle, as Mark realised with a little inward groan, in spite of the simplicity of her black gown and the absence of any ornament save a single string of perfect but unostentatious pearls, not only seemed more beautiful than ever, but displayed all the charm of the born hostess and the tact which produces almost inspired conversation. The aftermath of dinner was singularly brief. There was a great political reception to which most of the people were going on, also a dance. The men lingered only a few minutes or so over their wine and immediately afterwards there was a general exit. Mark summoned up his courage and approached Felix Dukane.

"I wonder if I could have a word with you before I leave, sir?" he asked.

Dukane assented, not ungraciously.

"The same old subject, I suppose," he grumbled. "Well, we'd better have Estelle too, and hear what she has to say."

Again Mark groaned inwardly. He realised that Estelle's influence had been at work. The battle was won, only to be lost again.

"If she cares to come," he assented. "What I have to say concerns her too, to a certain extent."

They drifted into the library and Estelle, who had joined them, threw herself into an easy-chair with a little yawn, which was only half natural. Her lips were curved in a pleasant smile, her eyes were fixed thoughtfully but kindly upon the man who was taking his place in her thoughts as her lover. Mark himself was desperately uncomfortable. He had made no plans as to how to commence his avowal. Everything at first seemed blank before him.

"I am afraid that I am going to displease you very much indeed, Mr. Dukane," he began.

"You have done that already," was the curt but surprised retort. "Never mind about the preamble. Get on with what you have to say."

Mark took hold of himself. He kept his head turned away from Estelle. The disturbance of her presence still affected him.

"I wanted to tell you," he continued, "that I have decided to open Brennan's box to-night in the presence of yourself, if you choose to come, and De Fontanay."

There was a moment's silence. It was obvious that both father and daughter were surprised. Estelle sat up.

"What a shock!" she exclaimed. "And I thought you had come to talk about me!"

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" Dukane demanded angrily. "It was agreed between us that you should hold the papers until my loan was floated."

"That was my intention," Mark acknowledged. "Something has happened to change my mind. A few hours ago I was shown absolute proof of what we are all a little apt to deride. I was shown absolute proof that Germany is building, arming and training troops

to ten times the extent allowed her by the Treaty of Versailles."

"Where did you get this from?" Dukane demanded.

"The Marquis de Fontanay."

"A Frenchman, of course," Dukane sneered. "They are too frightened to live. What will you have? France should have left the Ruhr alone. She turned the knife in a rankling wound."

"Mr. Dukane, you are an Englishman?" Mark asked, a little desperately.

"The fact is well known," was the cool reply.

"You know what France suffered during the war? I do. I was out there from 1915 until the end. The acceptance by Germany of the verdict of the Conference and the loan which you have arranged for her will bring her back to her place amongst the great powers."

"What's all this about?" Dukane enquired suspiciously. "What are you talking politics to me for? Of course Germany must reassume her place amongst the empires of the world. It was only a matter of time. Any fool knows that."

"But she is admitted on sufferance," Mark continued, "and she doesn't mean to keep her word. Even to-day she is planning for the next war. I have seen the proofs, seen them within the last few hours."

"Well?"

"These proofs were brought to me by Raoul de Fontanay, the man who did his best to secure the papers which I bought from Brennan. He has proved to me that Germany means to fight again with the least possible delay, and he appeals to me to present before the world any evidences of her intention which there may be in Brennan's box, side by side with the evidence of which he is in possession."

"And your reply?" Dukane almost shouted.

Mark moistened his dry lips. He turned a little towards Estelle as though to include her in his appeal.

"Sir," he went on, "I beg you to consider for a moment the dilemma in which I am placed. I fought first for France and then for my own country in that very righteous war against Germany. I am not one of those who love to dwell upon the past, but nothing evil that has been said or written or recorded in history against Germany has been exaggerated. My sympathies are intensely with France. Lately I have become persuaded that for the sake of the rest of Europe it were better to let bygones be bygones and offer the new Germany a chance to come back once more to her place amongst the nations. For that reason, and because I believed I was doing a service to you and your daughter, I did my best to obtain those papers from Brennan which, if they had fallen into the hands of De Fontanay, as they would have done but for my efforts, might have been placed before the Conference."

"You acted on my initiative," Dukane reminded him harshly. "You were only a figurehead in the business."

"At that stage, perhaps so," Mark admitted. "Anyhow, I succeeded, as you know. Even then, however, De Fontanay, although he was my friend, made a desperate attempt to secure the papers. I fell into an adventure from which I narrowly escaped with my life. I did escape, however, and I retained possession of Brennan's secret, whatever it may be."

"Retained possession of it?" Dukane repeated angrily. "Of course you did! What's all this leading up to, anyhow?"

"I'll try to tell you in as few words as possible," Mark continued, with a deadly sinking of the heart. "This afternoon De Fontanay came to me once more—a desperate man. He brought me absolute, astounding

proofs of what is going on in various parts of Germany, especially Bavaria. The next war is arranged for almost to the approximate date, and at the present moment a secret society exists in Germany, pledged to the annihilation of France, of which the President himself is the head. I have seen the proofs. You can see them. On the strength of their undoubted authenticity, De Fontanay demanded from me that Brennan's box should be opened without further delay. And, Mr. Dukane, I am sorry, but I don't know how to refuse him."

"So this is what you have come to say?" Dukane asked, in a thick, unnatural voice.

"This is what I have come to say," Mark confessed. "You yourself can be present and can assist in the deliberations."

"Assist," Dukane thundered. "It is my right to control them."

Mark realised helplessly the *impasse* at which he had arrived. For the first time he turned definitely towards Estelle. From her, however, he gathered no encouragement, nothing of sympathy. She was leaning back in her easy-chair, her eyes cold, her mouth set.

"To put the matter plainly, sir," he wound up, "Germany cheated the Allies at the end of the war and is preparing to cheat them again. Even knowing that, for the sake of considerations—at which you can guess," he added, with a little falter in his voice—"I should have kept those papers locked up. But when it has been proved to me that Germany is already commencing her plans for the war which is to annihilate France, then I feel myself bound to answer De Fontanay's appeal and to take such hand as I can in the game."

"You are setting yourself deliberately—you, a minnow at the game," Dukane declared, his chin outthrust, his small eyes narrowed to bright points of anger

—"to ruin the greatest scheme I have ever conceived in my life."

"I regret it more than I can tell you," was the sad acknowledgement, "but there are some things which one must decide upon not according to one's preferences but according to one's conscience."

"Blast your conscience and you!" Dukane shouted.

He swung round to Estelle.

"Have you heard what this young man has been saying?" he demanded.

"I have heard every word," she answered.

"Do you blame me, Estelle?" Mark appealed, turning towards her, with a little break in his voice.

She threw the end of the cigarette which she had lit a few minutes before into the fire and leaned over to touch the bell.

"My dear Mr. Van Stratton," she said, "I think, as I have always thought of most men—that you are an imbecile. I am very disappointed. I have rung for your car."

"And when does this damnable ceremony take place?" Dukane demanded.

"At twelve o'clock, at my house," Mark replied.

"I shall be there. Better go now, before I lose my temper."

He threw open the door. Mark's dismissal was absolute and final. Even Estelle's farewell smile was a mockery. He turned and followed the footman who had answered her summons into the hall.

CHAPTER XXXV

Felix Dukane was the last to arrive and to be ushered into the library of Mark's house. After his entrance, Mark locked the door and reseated himself by Brennan's side behind the writing table. Two easy-chairs had been drawn up a few yards away. In one of these Raoul de Fontanay was seated; in the other Dukane, solemnly obeying a gesture from Mark, ensconced himself. Amongst three of the company an air of apprehension, manifested in different ways, clearly showed itself; Brennan, on the other hand, wore a beatific expression. He seemed to have developed in size and importance. He was dressed as though for a great ceremony. His tie was very white and very large, and his dress clothes erred where they could err in the way of extremes. His studs were dazzling. He wore a white carnation in his buttonhole. Between him and Mark there stood upon the table a small, plain deal box with iron clamps. In Mark's hand was a key.

"Any reason why we shouldn't get on with the ceremony?" Dukane demanded, a few seconds after he had settled down in his chair.

"There is just this to be said first," Mark replied. "I want you to examine first of all the evidences of Germany's will for war which have been collected by France's agents in Germany and which arrived here unfortunately too late to be laid before the Conference. De Fontanay and I have examined them carefully. We have convinced ourselves of their authenticity. Brennan here is able

to assert that of his certain knowledge they are not even exaggerated. I should like you, sir," Mark concluded, turning to Dukane, "to examine them."

Felix Dukane took the little bundle of papers into his hand grudgingly, but not without interest. He studied them slowly, one by one. Then he handed them back.

"Well?" he demanded harshly.

"You admit the possible truth of these documents?" De Fontanay asked softly.

"Why not?" Dukane rejoined. "Why get hysterical, all of you, because Germany wants to fight again? Of course she wants to fight again. What nation with a spark of manhood in her wouldn't? You yourself, Marquis—you, Mark Van Stratton—you two would be the first, if your countries had been conquered, to join one of these secret military societies which, just because they are German, you think so horrible. Why can't you be world men instead of Englishmen, Frenchmen and Americans? Every nation has a right to exist."

"No nation has a right to break its solemn pledges," De Fontanay insisted.

Dukane smiled.

"Because one man," he said, "signs a paper on behalf of Germany, do you suppose that he is going to bind every man of his nation to a certain course of action? Probably to-day the majority of the German nation are for peace. You will never keep the firebrands from blustering, though. It isn't common sense. A strong and prosperous Germany is the greatest security you could have. If she can get everything she wants without fighting for it, she won't fight. If she can't, she'll fight, and nothing that you or I or any Conference could do would stop her. You two are doubtless brave men, and you are without a doubt sentimentalists, but as diplomatists, as men of vision, you do not exist. You see

no further than a man who in a fog can see only his hand in front of his face. Get on with the business for which we are here. These documents show that Germany is better prepared than I had imagined, but I say that although she is an enemy country she is only following her destiny by seeking to reëstablish her military forces. Get on with the work of to-night, and let us see what that box holds."

"You realise, sir, I trust," De Fontanay said coldly, "that we are in complete disagreement."

"The matter is of no importance," Dukane replied roughly. "We are of a different mentality."

Brennan, who had the air of becoming a little impatient, leaned over and whispered in Mark's ear. The latter nodded. Just at that moment came an interruption. There was a knock at the door. Mark rose to his feet, crossed the room and opened it. It was Andrews who stood there, and, in the background, Estelle, wrapped from head to foot in an ermine coat.

"I was not invited," she said, "but after my father had left I thought to myself, why should not I be there? It is a matter which I too must understand."

Mark hesitated for a moment. There were no signs of any softening in her face. She looked at him steadily, with challenge in her eyes which seemed to have become suddenly cold.

"So far as I am concerned," Mark decided, "there is no reason why you should not enter. I am afraid, however, that you will find that your father's views are scarcely ours."

"I am prepared already," she replied coolly, "to be disappointed in you."

Mark stood on one side and she passed into the room. He locked the door and returned.

"Miss Dukane," he announced, "has asked permission

to be present at the opening of the box. No one, I presume, has any objection?"

De Fontanay rose to his feet.

"Miss Dukane," he said, "has, I imagine, earned her right to be here."

Mark placed an easy-chair for her and she threw off her coat. She was still wearing her dinner gown of black crêpe de chine and her rope of flawless pearls.

"So I am in time," she observed, looking towards the box.

Brennan answered her with a consequential bow.

"Mademoiselle has arrived at the moment of action," he declared. "Time has been wasted in what appears to me to be a profitless discussion."

Dukane scowled at him.

"Profitless because you too, in the large things of the world, are a fool," he said. "The question which diverted us was has Germany—a proud but beaten nation—the right to arm herself, secretly if she cannot openly. I maintain that she has. No one man, no dozen men, for the matter of that, can sign away a nation's capacity for rehabilitation. The Germans are not a nation of sheep like us Englishmen. No doubt we should keep our pledges if we made them, but that is not because we have a higher sense of honour, but because we have a less virile individuality. I will give you an example. Do you suppose that there is a nation since the days of the Medes and Persians who would submit to the taxation under which England is labouring to-day? Would your people submit, De Fontanay?"

"The question appears to me to be immaterial," De Fontanay replied.

"It is not," Dukane replied passionately. "It is the root of such decision as you may make to-day. I tell you that France would not even take the trouble to

guillotine the legislators who made such demands upon her. She would simply laugh and not pay. There is no other nation in the world which would commit financial suicide for a moment of melodrama, no other politician than an Englishman who would dare to conceive it, no other people save us, the meekest, most asinine nation in some respects, if the most magnificent in others, who would have suffered it. Psychologically you cannot judge Germany by English or French standards. The three nations are as different as individuals. All this talk about the criminality of Germany because she seeks to follow her destiny is ridiculous."

Brennan leaned back in his chair with an air of disgust.

"Was I summoned here," he asked, "to assist in a discussion which does not in the least interest me? I am weary of these matters. I have greater things to say, greater things to tell you of."

Then Mark took up the key, inserted it in the lock of the box and opened the lid. Even Brennan's expression changed to one of expectancy. De Fontanay leaned anxiously forward. Estelle's lips were a little parted, her fingers were clasped tightly together. Brennan first of all drew from the top a large photograph. He handed it to Mark.

"Will you be so good," he invited, "as to examine this for a moment and to pass it around."

Mark looked at it carefully and did as he was told. They all studied it with some interest. It was a picture of nine men seated round a table in a garden. There were maps upon the table and writing materials. Dukane, to whom the photograph was handed last, looked at it the longest. A curious expression came into his face. His eyes met Brennan's. He was the first to realise the significance of what he saw.

"May I ask you what you think of my picture?" Brennan enquired, rubbing his hands slightly together.

"It may have a significance which I don't get," Mark replied. "Personally it looked to me like an out-of-date photograph of an elderly caricature of William of Hohenzollern presiding over a meeting of his War Council."

Brennan smiled.

"You are after all not so far wrong, Mr. Van Stratton," he said. "That is a picture of William of Hohenzollern presiding over his War Council of to-day, taken five months ago in the garden of a villa outside the town of Homsburg in Bavaria."

"Five months ago in Bavaria?" Mark repeated incredulously.

Brennan smiled. It was his moment of triumph.

"Five months and three days, to be exact," he replied. "I took the picture myself from the tree you can see in the foreground."

CHAPTER XXXVI

The somewhat dazed silence was broken by Dukane.

"You assert then," he demanded, "that William of Hohenzollern has left Holland?"

"I not only assert it, but I can prove it," Brennan replied. "Some time last June there arrived at Doorn a medical masseur from Berlin to attend the Emperor. He had a suite of rooms adjoining, and one suspects that a great deal of the time which the household imagined was given to massage was spent by the two men in studying each other's personalities. In August the masseur ostensibly left with the gratitude of his patient and large fees. It was, as a matter of fact, the Emperor who left Doorn and the masseur who remained. That is the reason why the name of William of Hohenzollern has for months past dropped out of all newspaper comments. The masseur, personating him, has gone into seclusion. William of Hohenzollern, as Herr Trung, went through to Bavaria, where he occupies a moderate-sized shooting box in the middle of a wood, and is visited continually by various members of the militarist party. Months ago, the War Council was reëstablished, and secret manifestos have been issued. The photograph, you see," Brennan continued, "was taken by me, the electrician of the establishment, from the top of the tree on the left-hand side. A sudden breeze would have cost me my life. The click of my camera very nearly did. Ludendorff, who is only partly reëstablished, looked around for a moment suspiciously. No one else heard it."

"It was the Emperor himself," De Fontanay exclaimed, "who drafted that bombastic manifesto!"

"Without a doubt," Brennan assented. "He is writing manifestos, drawing up schemes for military training and plans for the next war every minute of his life. He is only feverishly anxious to launch upon the world his exultant manifesto of defiance."

"It seems incredible that such a secret could be kept," Mark observed.

"Why should it be?" Brennan replied. "The district where the shooting box is situated—it was built only for purposes of sport—is very sparsely inhabited, and the people all around are intensely loyalist. There is an idea that something is happening at the house in the wood, but what it is no one knows. The people themselves are its natural protectors. They answer no questions and they have an ugly way with strangers. Believe me, the secret will be kept until the Emperor can contain himself no longer and issues his proclamation announcing that, in defiance of the whole world, he has returned to his own country and his own people.

"You have other things to tell us, Brennan," Mark reminded him after a brief but absorbed pause.

Brennan dived his hand into the box and brought out a handful of maps and plans. He laid these upon a small table in front of Dukane and De Fontanay.

"My congratulations," he said, "are due to De Fayenne, the Marquis de Fontanay's agent in Germany. He appears to have stumbled upon the bare facts upon which I am able to enlarge. If you will study the principal map there you will find in different-coloured blocks plans of a hundred and thirty-one factories which practically comprise the whole town, the name of which is given just over the scale. These are factories devoted to various manufactures, some of bicycles, some of cameras,

but the majority of heavy agricultural implements, not one of them ostensibly for the production of artillery. Yet to every one of these, during the last two years, there has been added a secret and subterranean annex in which the manufacture of machine guns of an entirely new pattern has been carried on. It is the lightest, the coolest, the most efficient weapon of destruction the world has ever known. A specification of it is attached to the map, a specification which, alas, cost me the lives of four of my men, but I will guarantee that it is authentic. Germany, at the present moment, has enough of these weapons to equip an army of eight hundred thousand men. In six months' time she will have double the quantity. To the right of the map you will perceive a quantity of low buildings on a piece of marshy land. This is where the new explosive, porlabite, is being made."

De Fontanay looked up curiously.

"My reports indicate," he said, "that it is being made in Russia."

"That is entirely a bluff," Brennan declared. "There is a small factory there, which is continually being blown up, with the object of bringing discredit upon the explosive. As a matter of fact, nothing like it has ever been known. It has ten times the force of nitroglycerine and is far more easily handled. The samples of porlabite which have been offered in Paris and London, tested and discredited, were neither more nor less than fakes. The Japanese inventor who brought them over showed them with his tongue in his cheek. He hoodwinked the Italian War Office and sold them the formula for ten thousand pounds. They abandoned its manufacture within a month. This, in a way," Brennan went on earnestly, "has been the best-kept secret in Germany. The whole world has been deceived by the spurious stuff which has been offered. Porlabite really is by far the

greatest explosive in the world. Germany possesses enough already to blow England into the volcanic island she once was."

"You have the formula?" De Fontanay asked.

Brennan shook his head.

"Alas," he confessed, "the greatest of us must fail sometimes. I have studied the matter from every point of view—I who know more of espionage than any other man in the world—and I declare most solemnly that no stranger in the world could enter that laboratory and leave it alive. As to heavy guns, the whole world knows about them. They are being made in Russia at war speed. And as to aeroplanes, Germany scarcely troubles to conceal her activities. A bomb no bigger than your head, charged with porlabite and dropped from one of her new Fokkers, which can remain poised in the air at a thousand feet, could wreck the whole of Piccadilly from the Circus to Knightsbridge."

"Have we evidence, Mr. Brennan," Estelle asked calmly, "as to the truth of what you are telling us?"

Brennan pointed his hand to Dukane.

"Your father," he said, "has known me for twenty-one years. I worked for him for ten. I have my faults, as he has, but has he ever known me tell a lie?"

"No," Dukane acknowledged grudgingly. "You're a cold-blooded scoundrel but you were never a liar."

"These maps and plans belong to Mr. Van Stratton," Brennan continued. "On the plan of this set of factories, not only are the streets in the town given, but the names of the firms and their ostensible object of manufacture. Furthermore, I do not come here to tell you vaguely that the Emperor Wilhelm of Hohenzollern is living somewhere in Bavaria. I give you the name of the town from which his abode is exactly eleven miles distant, I show you the turn from the main road you must

take to reach it, I give you the name under which he is living. There is not one item of my information which cannot be proved. For the training of her men, Germany has only to wait now for a few months. Already great progress has been made. For myself, I see things coming. I have lived cheerfully for many years in the shadow of death. I shall leave behind me the name of the greatest spy who ever worked for the love of the game, and the love of the game solely."

"Let me ask you this question, Mark," De Fontanay said, leaning forward: "Do you believe Brennan?"

"I confess that I do," was the reluctant reply.

"So do I," De Fontanay agreed. "What about you?" he added turning to Dukane.

"I keep my own counsel," Dukane answered harshly.

Brennan lit a cigar from an open box upon the sideboard close at hand, mixed himself a drink and returned complacently to the table. The others were examining his plans. Dukane was seated with his hands in his trousers pockets, a morose frown upon his face. Estelle whispered in his ear and he nodded.

"Well," he said, turning to Mark. "You asked me here to the ceremony. I've sat it through with you. What are you going to do?"

"Yes," Estelle repeated, looking across at Mark steadfastly, "what are you going to do?"

"I am allying myself with De Fontanay in the matter," Mark announced. "We shall lay these particulars before the Prime Minister, who will probably take them to Paris."

Dukane leaned over and struck the table heavily with his fist.

"If you do," he thundered, "you will deserve to be crucified. You will blunder into mischief which will plunge all Europe into chaos. At the best you may re-

tard the onward course of Germany for a matter of five years. As against that you will deal a smashing blow to all progress, all civilization. My loan will never be floated. You, a philanderer in serious affairs, a nincompoop, will be responsible for the greatest financial crash the world has ever known. Can't you be made to see reason? Don't you realise that the future of every country in Europe is bound up in Germany's rehabilitation?"

There was a sudden change in Estelle's face. She leaned forward. Her very attitude was one of pleading.

"Mark!" she murmured.

For a single moment the grim look passed from his face, only to be replaced by one of pain.

"Estelle," he said, "I'd have done anything on earth not to have been dragged into this, but I'm there and I must do what I think is right."

Dukane was beside himself with rage. His fists were still clenched; the veins on his forehead thick.

"You blasted puppy!" he muttered. "God, if I were a younger man I'd crush the life out of you! To think that you dared—"

Words seemed to fail him. Estelle took his arm.

"We may as well go," she whispered.

Brennan withdrew for a moment the cigar from his lips.

"Wait," he directed. "I have a suggestion; it might almost be termed an inspiration. There was one question I was surprised that you did not ask me. I fancied that I should hear you enquire what would be Germany's plight, supposing these vast stores of machine guns and explosives were discovered?"

"We shall confiscate them," De Fontanay declared eagerly.

Brennan shook his head.

"You will not have the chance," he declared. "This is where the superb thoroughness of the country to whom I owe a share of my parentage comes in. Each one of the factories upon the plan there is fused for an explosion. You will see, upon the shores of the lake, about a mile from the porlabite factory, a small tower. That is occupied by two men who live there day and night, a telephone upon the table. At a single word they have only an electric button to press a stipulated number of times and all there ever was of porlabite disappears from the face of the earth. Germany has shown herself ruthless in the destruction of other people's property. She is ruthless also in the destruction of her own, should the necessity arise. I beg that you will continue to listen to me."

He paused to relight his cigar.

"Now, I have heard what my old patron, my sometime enemy, my sometime friend, has had to say, and I have listened also to Mr. Mark Van Stratton, who seems to me to be a young man of kindly heart, of limited vision, but a devoted friend. Both have reason in their arguments. It is perfectly true that if these secret preparations of Germany are discovered, there will be ferment in Europe, Mr. Dukane's loan will never be floated, the money markets of the world and many of its industries will collapse. If, on the other hand, Mr. Mark Van Stratton throws the result of all my labours upon the dustheap of oblivion, as Felix Dukane would certainly do, then without a doubt Germany will be in a position to strike a little sooner, the inevitable war will come a year or two earlier. As against that great prosperity will reign everywhere. The weak countries will become stronger, trade will flourish, Mr. Dukane himself will probably take his place as the rival of Henry Ford and Rockefeller. You see, there is good in either

course, and evil in either course. Now I have a proposition to make."

They all looked at him intently—a strange-looking little person, with a slightly flushed face, his mass of fair hair a little unkempt, his shirt front sagged. Yet then, as always, when he was sober, there exuded from the man an atmosphere of power.

"My friend, Mr. Mark Van Stratton here, is a young man of courage, to whom adventure should be the soul of life. The Marquis de Fontanay has in Monsieur de Fayenne the cleverest secret service agent in Germany, barring myself. I commend to you an enterprise not impossible of achievement, to which I myself can point the way, which might simplify the whole situation. Make your way over to Germany, work out your plan of action upon the particulars I shall give you, blow up the world's store of porlabite and Germany's huge supply of machine guns. It can be done, but I warn you it will need two men with the hearts of lions, it will need two men who will probably pay with their lives."

"How long would this take?" Mark asked, a little hoarsely.

"A matter of a fortnight," Brennan replied. "I can point out to you, step by step, all that you must do, but you yourself must summon the courage for the last act."

De Fontanay shook his head.

"It's a mad scheme, Mark," he said.

"Nevertheless, I accept it," Mark announced without hesitation. "That is my decision. De Fontanay, I am sorry, but I must have my way. This box will be relocked. It shall be yours in a month, if I fail to return from Germany."

"Mind," Brennan insisted, "I must not be misunderstood. I myself shall not leave London until the day I sail for South America. I will give you and De Fayenne

as much of my time as you like. I will tell you what to do, step by step, the people to be avoided, the people who can be bought. I will tell you where to seek lodgings and the nature of the occupation for which you had better apply, but I myself have finished with adventure, and this one, as I warn you before you start, may cost you your lives."

Mark gathered up the plans and maps, thrust them back into the box, locked it and put the key into his pocket.

"That is all there is to be said about this matter," he decided firmly. "I agree with Mr. Dukane that if I publish this information it may relieve France but it will set back Europe for a generation. I agree with De Fontanay, however, that if I destroy it I should be guilty of a dishonourable action towards France, a country I love. I shall take the middle course. That leaves a chance, at any rate."

He avoided looking at Estelle. She, however, as her father rose, held out her hand. There was very little change in her expression, very little more of the new kindliness which had seemed to him so wonderful a thing.

"Well," she said, "I am afraid you are rather a stupid young man, Mark, but you have at least courage."

"A month is better than nothing," Dukane added, as he turned away without shaking hands. "All the same, I wish to God you hadn't blundered into this business."

Mark, who had rung the bell, unlocked the door and held it open. Dukane passed out scowling, but Estelle, as she followed her father, looked up at him for a moment with a smile.

"Well, I'll wish you good luck anyhow," she said.

"That is all?" he asked wistfully.

"That is all."

Mark closed the door behind them and returned to his

place. De Fontanay laid his hand upon his shoulder sympathetically.

"I am very, very sorry, Mark," he sighed. "I warned you, though, of what I feared. Estelle Dukane is her father's daughter."

Mark mixed himself a strong whisky and soda.

"Well," he confessed, "I suppose I have been a bungler. Brennan, you are not in a hurry?"

"Not in the least," Brennan, who had just lit a fresh cigar, declared. "I am very comfortable and very happy. I will stay here, if you like, all night."

"Then ring up for De Fayenne," Mark begged his friend, "and let's get to work."

CHAPTER XXXVII

At Liverpool Street, one morning some weeks later, Mark, limping slightly and with his right arm in a sling, stepped on to the platform and disentangled himself from the crowd of boat passengers. Embassy servants were waiting for him, and an Embassy car was in attendance. In less than a quarter of an hour he had reached the Ritz. Raoul de Fontanay, looking years younger, came down the stairs from the raised portion of the lounge with both hands outstretched. At another time Mark would have been embarrassed at the warmth of his welcome.

"My dear friend," he asked affectionately, "all is well?"

"All is well," Mark assured him. "I crossed to Harwich last night and came straight on to keep our appointment."

De Fontanay glanced around. They were seated at a corner table of the lounge, and practically alone.

"You know about De Fayenne?"

Mark nodded.

"Poor chap! I suppose it wasn't likely though that both of us should come through."

"The Germans never published a word as to the cause of the explosions," De Fontanay continued. "We got news, though, from De Fayenne's brother. They got him just as he was leaving the room, after the job was done. They shot him on sight. Tell me about yourself."

"I fished for two days in the lake," Mark recounted slowly. "On the night at the hour we had fixed upon,

I left the boat in the marshes and crept up to the tower as soon as it was dark. I opened the door with the key I got from Brennan's friend, and crawled up the stairs into the room. There were two men there. One of them was so quick that I had to shoot him at sight. The other closed with me. He was a powerful fellow but not much good as a wrestler. As soon as I had him unconscious I went to the instrument. Three times, Raoul—twice—then once—then seven times quickly. Afterwards I looked out of the window. I'll never forget the sight as long as I live. It was as though the sky was spitting and the earth around was spouting blood from one arc of the heavens to the other. Then the tower collapsed. I scrambled down somehow, but a sheet of steel fell on my arm and another on my leg. The man whom I had left for unconscious had a shot at me too, and grazed my elbow. However, I got to the car and I was inside the French lines in five hours. I had to lie up for a day or two. I see in the papers that the Germans put it down to Bolshevists."

De Fontanay tapped the table warningly and rose to his feet.

"Here's Henry, with heaps of news for you," he announced—"and our cocktails, I am glad to say," he went on, as he watched the waiter's approach.

"What's been happening to you?" Dorchester asked, as the two men shook hands.

"Automobile smash outside Paris," Mark explained. "Might have been a lot worse."

"Well, I'm glad to see you back again," his friend declared. "We missed you last month. What do they say in Paris about the explosions?"

"Well, they can't pretend to be sorry," Mark replied, "especially in face of the rumours that it was the district where a lot of secret arms were concealed."

"I have it on the best authority," Dorchester announced, a little didactically, "that the greater explosion of the two disposed of about a thousand tons of some marvellous new explosive. Damned good thing if it was so!"

"I haven't seen the German papers much," Mark observed, as he sipped his cocktail. "What do they say about it?"

"On the whole they are very philosophical. They are, after all, a practical nation. People talk about their bellicose intentions but I don't believe in them. Look how quietly they gave up the Emperor when his flight from Doorn was discovered. No one believed that our escort would really be allowed to penetrate into Bavaria, but there didn't seem to be the slightest hitch. I think that William's day has passed."

They rose to their feet and a bowing *maître d'hôtel* conducted them to their usual table. Dorchester passed over the menu, which Mark studied with evident satisfaction.

"Even in the best of Paris restaurants," he confided, "there seems to be a sort of sameness about the food. It's good to be back again. Tell me the news."

"There isn't much politically," Dorchester observed. "The papers are all full of the bogey of German competition, but all the same trade is booming everywhere. This new German President—I never heard why the other resigned in such a hurry—seems to be a good chap. He has just made the most downright proclamation against militarism that any official German has done since the war. It's done no end of good too. The other chap's resignation, his pronouncement, and Wilhelm's being run out of the country has pretty well sealed the doom of the military party for this generation. Even the most vehement fire-eaters in Germany have collapsed, and their

chief organs are being discontinued for lack of subscriptions."

"I'm glad to hear it," Mark declared, raising his glass. "I've seen all of war I want. I drink to the Great Peace."

"The Great Peace," the others echoed.

They drank their toast in silence. From underneath their breath came fragments of that little broken tune.

"To abandon serious subjects," Mark suggested, steadily governing his voice, "tell me some more news. Does any one see much of the Dukanes?"

Dorchester shook his head indifferently.

"They have soared out of the social orbit of a poor British peer," he confided. "Estelle Dukane was easily the success of the season. They are still at Cruton House, I believe, but I heard that they were going abroad in a week or two."

"There are always rumours," De Fontanay observed. "Now that this thing is settled, perhaps you will be able to make your peace with old Felix Dukane. He has rather subsided lately into the land of mystery. No one knows what he is going to do with his countless millions. Yesterday I heard that he had bought Cruton House; the day before that he had bought a kingdom in the East. As for his daughter, they still talk of her marrying Prince Andropulo but there are half a dozen others who seem to be in the running."

Mark looked across the room towards the table where Estelle and her father had sat during that former luncheon, and remained for a moment silent. Dorchester plunged in, tactless but good-hearted.

"We both got it in the neck a bit there, eh, Mark?" he observed. "You hit it up wrong with Dukane, of course, and the girl was with him. Raoul told me about it. I hung on as long as I could, but it wasn't any good."

"After all, you're not exactly wearing the willow, are you?" Mark put in.

Dorchester laughed a little nervously.

"Well," he confessed, "you and I always had the same taste in girls, Mark, even out in France when we only looked at them. I hope you weren't thinking of consoling yourself in the same direction?"

Mark shook his head.

"Myra is one of the sweetest girls I know," he declared, "but we have always been too great friends to think of anything else. Our young Americans get like that so easily. You become such wonderful pals with a girl that it somehow does away with any idea you might have of love making. I envy any one who gets Myra, though."

Dorchester coughed a little nervously.

"I don't think any one will be annoyed," he said, "if I anticipate by a few hours the announcement which you will see in the *Morning Post* to-morrow. Myra and I are engaged. Brought it off last night."

Mark stretched out his hand. De Fontanay followed suit.

"I never congratulated any one more sincerely," Mark declared. "You're a lucky fellow, Dorchester."

"One of the luckiest I know," De Fontanay echoed emphatically.

"I never thought I should be the first of us three," Dorchester remarked. "Still, Myra's quite delightful and she seems to like the idea of living in England. We shall be married late in the autumn and we are going down to the Riviera for our honeymoon."

"Wonderful!" Mark sighed.

De Fontanay signed to the *sommelier* to refill their glasses.

"There is sentiment and sentiment," he propounded.

"Of the one sort we have too much in life, of the other too little. Let us drink to the memory of those days through which we passed, each of us knowing nothing of the morrow. Never, never since our first reunion, have I been able to drink this toast as to-day," he went on, with a ring almost of exultation in his tone. "Always there has been the cloud in my thoughts, the fear of the future. Now we may drink to our own countries and especially to the country which the generosity, the chivalry of our friends, has preserved for us—to France!"

"Will you dine with us to-night, Mark?" Dorchester asked, as he set his glass down after a moment's silence. "Myra will be coming."

"I'm not sure," Mark answered a little lifelessly. "If I may, I'll ring you up. Mr. Huventhayer may be expecting me at the Embassy."

"Will you be going on with your work there?" De Fontanay enquired.

Mark hesitated.

"I have been offered something in Paris," he confided. "Promotion, as a matter of fact. I have asked for a fortnight to consider it. I suppose no man ought to be idle really. I shall probably accept."

"You will do well," De Fontanay said softly. "It is work alone which glorifies a man's life. Sport and pleasure can only fill the corners."

Luncheon drew on to a close. All the time Mark had cherished a foolish hope which was half a dread that the event of their previous luncheon might repeat itself and that, even from a distance, he might catch a glimpse of Estelle. Nothing of the sort happened, however, although the restaurant was full and Mark found friends on every side. Afterwards the three strolled out into the streets together.

"I to my work," Dorchester yawned. "I'm on a most

accursed committee who never do anything. For some reason or other I always put my name down for the wrong committees. I shall hear from you later, Mark?"

"I will telephone," the latter promised.

Dorchester stepped into a taxi and Mark walked slowly up Berkeley Street with De Fontanay's arm through his.

"Mark, old chap," his friend said, "we have never spoken of it, but I hope even though it hurts—I hope you know that you did the great thing."

Mark pressed the arm the touch of which against his was almost a caressing one.

"Why, surely I do, Raoul," he replied with well-affected cheerfulness. "And if the same issue came to me to-morrow, I should do exactly the same thing. You see," he went on, "I hate to admit it because, if ever I succeed, it will take me many years of my life to forget her, but I think that Estelle Dukane is just one of those witch women who take men's hearts and give little in return. I don't think she cared for me one beat of her pulse. I'm schooling myself to believe that. After all, she is her father's daughter and we know what he is."

"We each have these things to meet in life," De Fontanay said, a little sadly, as they lingered at the corner of Clarges Street. "I know you think I'm a cynic. I do not often talk of women, but when I do, I do not hesitate to express what has become my profound belief. They have taken a place in our Western life out of proportion to their importance. They are not worth the thoughts we give them, the suffering they cause—and yet we are made as we are and no philosophy can help us if once the great thing comes. I never felt it, Mark. But God knows I'm sorry."

Mark, always beloved of his servants, found cheerful

countenances awaiting him in Curzon Street. Andrews opened the door, his face wreathed in a welcoming smile. Brand, the chauffeur, was waiting in the hall, hoping for orders. Mrs. Parks, the housekeeper, who seldom made an appearance, came rustling up to pay her respects, and Robert was lingering in the background.

"Everything all right, Andrews?" Mark enquired, after he had shaken hands all round.

"Everything is quite all right, sir."

"Will you be dining at home, sir?" Mrs. Parks asked.

"I don't think so," was the indifferent reply. "I'll let you know presently."

"The cars are all in excellent condition, sir," the chauffeur ventured.

"I'll have the Fiat out to-morrow," Mark promised. "I'll just go upstairs, Robert, and change my clothes. We had rather a rough crossing."

"Certainly, sir. I beg your pardon, though, sir, I ought to have told you before. There's a lady waiting in the library."

"A lady!" Mark exclaimed.

"A young lady, sir," Robert repeated. "I'm sorry, but she didn't give a name or I didn't catch it, but she's been here before."

Mark took a step forward and Andrews threw open the door. Estelle was putting the finishing touch to a vase of roses. There were still an armful upon the table.

"Robert, will you bring me another vase, please," she asked.

"Estelle!" Mark exclaimed, closing the door behind him.

She looked up with a little start. He came forward and stopped again. Then she held out her hands. As he drew nearer his wonder increased. It was Estelle, but surely a different Estelle. There was something in

her eyes for which he had prayed but had despaired of finding; a trembling of the lips, a little uncertainty, a complete abandonment of that gay and wonderful poise which had seemed always to keep her aloof from the emotions of everyday life.

"Mark dear," she said, "how long you have been away, and I haven't finished your flowers. And your poor leg! I hope it doesn't hurt very much."

She came into his arms with perfect naturalness, dropping the roses she had been holding, whose perfume seemed to fill the room. Her surrender, now that it had arrived, was exquisitely spontaneous, exquisitely complete. Her eyes, her hair, her lips, seemed to find joy in his touch. The moments passed breathlessly.

"You come to me, Estelle," he cried at last incredulously, "of your own accord?"

"Of course I do!" she replied. "Who do you suppose would send me? I never meant you to take that terrible risk really."

"And your father?"

"Reconciled but grumpy," she confided. "You are to dine with us to-night alone. Really, on the whole, I think he's quite pleased with you."

"And—Andropulo?"

"He went home a week ago. Father and I agreed that we shouldn't like the climate of Drome. Anything else you want to know?"

"Just one thing," he asked, taking her again into his arms.

She laughed with her lips lingering close to his.

"If you do not know it already," she whispered, "you must be very foolish."

THE END

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